MARY DOWNING HAHN

A GHOSTLY GATHERING

Three complete novels

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Three Complete Novels

Mary Downing Hahn

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
Boston *New York*

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hmhbooks.com

eISBN 978-0-358-00704-3
v3.0320

ONE FOR SORROW

A Ghost Story

MARY DOWNING HAHN

Clarion Books
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT
BOSTON NEW YORK

Dedication
James Cross Giblin
July 8, 1933–April 10, 2016

This book is dedicated to the memory of my beloved editor, mentor, and friend for over thirty years.

Thank you, Jim, for your patience, kindness, and generosity and for all you've taught me about writing—and rewriting. I wish this were not the last of our joint efforts.

ONE

ALTHOUGH I DIDN'T REALIZE IT, my troubles began when we moved to Portman Street, and I became a student in the Pearce Academy for Girls, the finest school in the town of Mount Pleasant, according to Father. I was shy, maybe even a little timid, and I had no idea how to make friends. In my old town, there were three girls my age living in my neighborhood, and I didn't remember making friends with them. We lived on the same street, and we were friends. It was as simple as that.

But no girls lived on my new street, so when I walked into class on a sunny September day, I didn't know anyone. All I saw was a sea of white blouses, blue ties, and blue skirts. Row after row of them. I was too nervous to notice the faces, just the uniforms.

Miss Harrison introduced me. "Girls, it's my pleasure to introduce Annie Browne, new to our school from the Fairfield Academy in Mount Holly. Please make her feel welcome in true Pearce fashion."

I didn't smile for fear no one would smile back. With my head down, I took my seat, folded my hands on my desktop, and stared at the stack of books Miss Harrison gave me. *World Geography,* the biggest and thickest, was on the bottom. Weighing it down were five more books—*Sixth-Grade Arithmetic, Adventures in Reading Book II, Grammar Handbook, United States History,* and *A Girl's Treasury of Poetry,* as well as a penmanship workbook.

Miss Harrison began the morning exercises with the Lord's Prayer, but before we began the Pledge of Allegiance, she said, "Let us say a prayer for our boys overseas. May God bring them home safely from this terrible war."

We bowed our heads, and I prayed especially hard for Uncle Paul, Mother's brother who was in France fighting the Germans. The newspapers were full of dreadful stories of trenches and poison gas and bombs and battles. I worried every day about my uncle. I wished President Wilson had

never declared war, but Father said it was our duty to save Europe from Germany. I was glad he was too old to be drafted.

After we pledged allegiance to the flag, we took our seats and Miss Harrison pulled down a large map of the world and quizzed us about the war. Tapping her pointer on northeast France, she asked what was happening there. I wasn't sure, so I lowered my head and prayed she wouldn't call on me.

Plenty of hands shot into the air. Miss Harrison looked around the room and said, "Rosie O'Malley. Stand up and tell us what you know."

A red-haired girl in the back row got to her feet. She had so many freckles you could hardly see her skin.

She grinned at the girl who sat beside her. "That's the Argonne Forest," she told Miss Harrison. "We're fighting a big battle there against the dirty rotten Huns."

Miss Harrison frowned. "Correct on location, Rosie, but I've told you before not to use slang. In this class, we speak formal English. Please repeat your answer, using appropriate terminology."

Rosie shrugged. "All right. We're fighting the dirty Germans in the Argonne Forest, and I hope we kill every one of them."

A low giggle spread through the room, and Miss Harrison frowned again. "Just answer, Rosie, without the adjective and your opinions."

Rosie's face turned as red as her hair. "We're fighting the *Germans* in the Argonne Forest, but we all know they're dirty Huns. That's what everybody calls them. Huns, Krauts, Fritz, swine—why can't we say what they are?"

"You may use crude language when you are not in school, Rosie, but in this room you will speak formally. Please see me after school."

Rolling up the map with a snap, Miss Harrison told us to open our arithmetic books. Instead of giggles, I heard soft moans. Whether it was sympathy for Rosie or dread of arithmetic, I couldn't tell. Maybe both.

After a lesson on changing fractions to percentages, we diagrammed long complex sentences that used up a whole page in my notebook and took a spelling test. Not too hard; I only missed two words out of twenty—a solid B. Father would ask why I missed two, of course, but Mother would say there was nothing wrong with a B.

When Miss Harrison dismissed us for recess, I was happy to stretch my legs but worried about going outside to play with girls I didn't know. I

walked to the cloakroom slowly, hoping the others had already gotten their coats and rushed to the playground.

Only one girl remained. She had a pale, round face, and her blond hair was pulled tightly into French braids. She was taller than I was and heavier, not actually fat, but definitely not thin. When I reached for my sweater, she smiled at me, revealing a mouthful of the most crooked teeth I'd ever seen.

"My name is Elsie Schneider," she said. "And we're going to be friends, Annie Browne. I knew it when I saw you come through the door."

She grabbed my hand. Her skin was cold and damp, and I wanted to snatch my hand away and wipe it on my skirt. But that would have been rude, so I let her hold it.

Elsie led me down the empty hall. "There's lots you need to know about this school," she said. "Things I wish somebody had told me when I started here last year."

"It seems nice," I said. "As far as schools go," I added so she wouldn't think I was a goody-goody.

"Nice?" Elsie laughed. "Just wait. You'll see. The girls here are all conceited snobs. They've already chosen who they want for friends. They didn't choose me, and they won't choose you, either."

She squeezed my hand so hard it hurt and added, "But that's all right because we have each other."

Pushing open a door, she stopped on the top step. Below us, the girls in our class played tag, jumped rope, and gathered in laughing groups.

Of all the girls, Rosie laughed the loudest and talked the most. She was like a toy wound up too tight. She swung high and ran fast, and everyone followed her, doing what she did, and calling "Rosie, wait." "Rosie, I'll share my cookies with you if you sit next to me at lunch." "No, sit next to me, and I'll give you my cupcake, devil's food with chocolate icing." "Rosie, come to the sweet shop after school, and I'll buy you a peppermint stick."

Rosie never said yes or no. She laughed and kept going as if she was waiting for the best offer.

Elsie made a face. "And that girl, Rosie O'Malley, is the worst one of all. You saw how rude she was to Miss Harrison. She's absolutely awful. I hate her. Don't you?"

"I don't even know her." In my eyes, Rosie was exciting, a girl who did things and had lots of friends. She was much more interesting than Elsie,

but I certainly wasn't ready to say that and risk losing the only friend I'd made so far.

"Do you want to play hopscotch or swing or anything?" I asked Elsie. It seemed to me some of the girls had noticed us standing apart. A few whispered among themselves, looked at Elsie and me, and laughed. I didn't like being stared at. I checked to see if my sweater was buttoned crooked. Maybe a shoelace was untied. Maybe my hair had a tangle Mother hadn't seen or I had jam on my mouth.

In answer to my question, Elsie shook her head. "All the swings are taken. And I hate hopscotch, don't you? It's almost as stupid as jump rope and jacks. Baby stuff, *I* think."

"Hopscotch is okay. You know, if there's nothing else to do." Here I was again, trying not to offend her. Why couldn't I speak up and say I loved hopscotch? Like jump rope and jacks, I was good at it. My friends at my old school called me the hopscotch queen.

Elsie took my hand again. "Let's walk together, Annie."

Conscious of being watched, I let her hold my hand and lead me down the steps. A group of girls thronged around us. Rosie grabbed Elsie's and my linked hands and held them up to show everyone.

"Look," she shouted. "Fat Elsie has a girlfriend!"

I snatched my hand away, but Rosie and everyone else laughed. One of Rosie's friends gave Elsie a little shove and looked at Rosie to see if she was impressed.

"Better not make Fat Elsie mad," Rosie sneered. "She'll tell Miss Harrison."

Someone began a chant, and the others took it up.

Tattletale
ate a snail,
threw it up in the garbage pail.

Elsie pulled me away. "Come on, Annie. Those girls aren't worth a wooden nickel. Who cares what they say? Not me."

Trying to ignore the other girls, I walked away with Elsie. Whether or not she cared, *I* cared.

Elsie pulled me closer. "I hate Rosie so much," she hissed in my ear. "Someday I'll get even with her. Just wait. You'll see."

Behind us, the other girls chanted our names and laughed. “Elsie and Annie sitting in a tree, fat and ugly as they can be.”

When the bell rang, I was more than ready to join the line waiting to go back to our classroom. On my first day at Pearce, I’d made one friend and twenty enemies.

Elsie and I took a place at the back of the line. Ahead of us, the other girls giggled and jostled one another until Miss Harrison pulled a whistle out of her coat pocket and blew a warning blast.

Immediately the line straightened and everyone stopped giggling. Two by two, we walked quietly inside and took our seats without a sound. Everyone, that is, except Elsie. She stopped at Miss Harrison’s desk and whispered a few words. Miss Harrison picked up her pencil and wrote something down.

“You may take your seat now, Elsie,” Miss Harrison said without looking up.

“Yes, ma’am.” Shooting a sly look at Rosie, Elsie sashayed to her seat and grinned at me. The dirty looks directed to Elsie shifted to me. The other girls were holding me to blame for whatever Elsie told Miss Harrison.

“Tattletale, ate a snail,” someone whispered behind me. My face burned with shame. I’d never tattled on anyone, not once in my whole life. I’d rather have had my tongue torn out than tell. It wasn’t fair to lump me with Elsie. Those girls didn’t even know me.

“Before we open our readers,” Miss Harrison said, “I must tell you that I expect you to exhibit the same good behavior on the playground as you do in the classroom. I will not tolerate name calling or teasing.”

What had Elsie told Miss Harrison? Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Rosie make a face at Elsie, carefully shielding herself from Miss Harrison’s watchful eye. Someone giggled. Miss Harrison looked at Rosie, who sat with her hands folded primly on her desk.

The rest of the day passed slowly. When the dismissal bell finally rang, my first thought was to escape from Elsie, but she was by my side before I had buttoned my sweater.

As we left the classroom, Elsie paused in the doorway to take a quick look at Rosie, who was standing at the blackboard, her back to us, writing, *I will use proper language in school.* Her handwriting sloped upward and her letters were poorly formed, but maybe that was because she was in a hurry to finish.

“I hope Miss Harrison makes her write it five hundred times,” Elsie whispered.

Miss Harrison had ears as sharp as her eyes. She gave Elsie and me an angry look, clearly warning us we’d be writing on the blackboard ourselves if we didn’t leave at once. Rosie turned her head and made a face at us both.

Once more, I was being blamed along with Elsie for things I hadn’t done.

As we walked down the school steps—it was against the rules to run, according to Elsie—she said, “You know what I think?”

I shook my head.

“Miss Harrison should make Rosie write it five *thousand* times and then erase it and tell her to start all over again, using her best handwriting instead of that scribble scrabble she’s doing.”

Elsie smiled with so much glee I turned my head away. How was I to escape from her?

TWO

WHEN WE REACHED PORTMAN STREET, I said, "I live just around the corner." Thinking I was rid of her at last, I started walking toward home, but to my disappointment, Elsie turned the corner with me.

"Do you live near here?" I crossed my fingers behind my back and hoped she'd say no.

"I live way across town, in the opposite direction." She took my hand. "I thought we'd go to your house and play."

I tried to think of a reason she couldn't come home with me, but my mind was numb. So hand in hand, we walked up the front steps and went inside.

Mother was sitting on the couch reading a magazine. When she saw me, she smiled and got to her feet to give me a hug and a kiss. "How was school, darling?"

Before I could answer, Elsie said, "This awful girl named Rosie was mean to Annie. And the other girls ganged up on us. But Annie and I are best friends, and we don't care what they say or do. We have each other."

Mother looked at Elsie as if she hadn't actually noticed her until she spoke up.

"This is Elsie Schneider," I told her. "She's in my class."

Mother smiled at Elsie but immediately looked at me. With concern, she asked, "Whatever happened, Annie? You had plenty of friends in our old neighborhood."

"Oh, but Mrs. Browne, you don't know the girls at Pearce," Elsie butted in again. "They're mean and conceited, and they do everything Rosie says. They like who *she* likes and hate everybody else."

Mother turned to me. "Should I speak to Miss Harrison about this?"

"No," I said, "please don't. You'll just make it worse."

"They already think we're tattletales," Elsie put in.

"I was about to fix hot chocolate." Mother spoke as if a treat might make Elsie and me feel better. "Would you two like some?"

"Oh, yes," Elsie said. "Do you have cookies? I *love* vanilla wafers."

We followed Mother to the kitchen. “You have such a pretty house,” Elsie told Mother. “It’s so comfortable and cozy.”

“Why, thank you.” Mother smiled at Elsie. “Aren’t you sweet?”

Elsie glanced at me, obviously pleased that Mother liked her.

Mother warmed milk and melted chocolate in the double boiler. Elsie watched her add sugar and butter.

As soon as Mother set steaming mugs and a plate of vanilla wafers on the table, Elsie reached for a cookie and stuffed it into her mouth as if she thought someone might slap her hand. She burned her tongue because she gulped a mouthful of hot chocolate before it cooled enough to drink. I noticed Mother watching Elsie as if she was wondering whether all the girls at Pearce behaved this way. If so, perhaps someone should teach them table manners.

“Elsie,” Mother said, “if you eat too many cookies, you won’t have room for dinner.”

Elsie merely shrugged and took another cookie. With her mouth full, she said, “I warned you I love vanilla wafers.”

When not a crumb remained and all the hot chocolate was gone, Elsie asked if we could play in my room for a while.

As she followed me upstairs, she caressed the oak banister. “I love the way this wood feels,” she said. “It’s so smooth. No splinters or chipped paint like my house.”

I didn’t know what she expected me to say, so I pretended I hadn’t heard her.

At the door to my room, Elsie stopped and stared. “This is all yours? Everything in it? Oh, Annie, you are so lucky!”

Something in her voice made me feel ashamed. Did I have too much? I’d never thought about it before. My friends in my old neighborhood had rooms like mine, filled with toys and books. I guess I’d thought everyone did.

Elsie ran around my room, taking in every detail. She studied each room in my dollhouse. Mother and I had furnished it like a Victorian mansion. A family of china dolls lived in it, along with several servants.

“I wish I lived in a house just like this!” she exclaimed. “Fancy furniture, pretty wallpaper, velvet curtains.” As she spoke, she touched the tiny sofas and chairs and examined the miniature plates on the table. She picked up each doll and studied its clothing.

From the dollhouse, she moved to shelves of books, touching them on their spines as if she were taking inventory. She tried out the rocking chair Father had made for me when I was little. She picked up the dolls sitting on a shelf and examined each one. She looked out my window at our big backyard, sloping away to a line of trees. She studied the floral design on the wallpaper. She even opened the doors of the tall walnut wardrobe in the corner and flipped through my skirts and dresses and blouses.

Finally she sat down on my bed and gave a little bounce as if she was testing the mattress. “You are my best friend in the whole world,” she said. “What good times we’ll have playing here.”

I tried to smile, but my face felt as rigid as the oak banister she’d admired. She didn’t notice my silence. She picked up Edward Bear and squeezed his tummy to make him growl.

“What makes that noise?” She poked Edward’s belly harder. “We should cut him open and find out.”

I tried to snatch Edward away from her, but she moved out of my reach. “Give him to me,” I cried. “I’ve had him since I was a baby. I’d never ever hurt him.”

“That’s stupid. How can you hurt a toy? He’s just a stuffed animal with half his fur gone and one eye missing. Old and ugly and smelly.”

In disgust, she tossed Edward aside and grabbed Antoinette, my favorite doll. She laid her on her back and watched her eyes close. She sat her up and watched them open. Then she tipped her back and forth to hear her say “Mama.”

It sounded as if poor Antoinette were crying out for me to rescue her, but when I reached for her, Elsie hugged the doll. “Let me hold her for a while. You have so many dolls, and I don’t have any. Not even one.”

“Mama, Mama,” cried Antoinette.

I didn’t like the rough way Elsie handled Antoinette, but I let her hold her. It wouldn’t do to be selfish. “Be careful with her,” I whispered. “She’s fragile.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t hurt her.” Elsie hugged her tighter. “Mama,” cried the doll.

When was Elsie going home? She’d been here a long time. It was almost dark. I decided to give her a hint. “It’s nearly dinnertime,” I said. “Won’t your mother be worried about you?”

“Oh no, I can stay as long as I want.” She smiled at me. “Nobody cares where I am or when I come home. In fact they’d be happy if they never saw me again.”

I stared at her, shocked. “You don’t mean that, Elsie. Of course your parents care where you are.”

“Not everyone is as lucky as you, Annie.” Elsie’s voice rose. “Do you think *I* get hot chocolate and cookies when I come home from school? Do you think *I* have a room full of toys and books? Or a wardrobe of pretty dresses?”

Not knowing what to say, I bent my head and smoothed the pleats in my skirt. How could I know what Elsie had or didn’t have? I’d never even been to her house—and if I had my way, I’d never go there or invite her here again.

Elsie leaned so close I felt her breath on my face. “I’d give anything to have a mother like yours. It’s not fair that you have so much and I have nothing!”

“But your mother—”

“You stupid goose, I don’t have a mother!”

“Everybody has a mother—”

“Not me,” Elsie yelled so loud spit came out of her mouth and hit me in the face. “My mother, my *real* mother, died when I was born. I never even saw her.”

I wanted to feel sorry for Elsie, I *did* feel sorry for her, but the way she was screaming scared me. If she kept it up, Mother would hear her and come running upstairs.

But she didn’t stop. She kept on yelling as if it were my fault I had a mother and she didn’t.

“It’s not fair Mama died. It’s not fair!” Suddenly she lowered her voice to a whisper. “Sometimes I *hate* Mama. If she hadn’t died, my father wouldn’t have married Hilda.”

She sat back and glared at me. “I bet you think I’m horrible, don’t you?”

Oh, yes, I thought, *she is horrible.* If only she’d leave, go away, never come back. I didn’t want to see her again, I didn’t want to be her friend. She’d said it herself—she was *truly* horrible.

Keeping my feelings to myself for fear of making her even angrier, I asked if Hilda was her stepmother.

“What a dumb question,” Elsie said. “Didn’t I just say my father married her?”

Yes, of course, she had just said that, but she’d called her Hilda instead of Mother, or whatever you call a stepmother, and that confused me.

“Hilda’s the kind of stepmother you read about in fairy tales. She hates me, and I hate her. If she dared, she’d leave me in a forest to die like a babe in the wood.”

“But what about your father? He must—”

“Papa thinks it’s my fault Mama died. I killed her getting born.” She looked at me as if daring me to say something. Anything at all. No matter what it was, she’d get mad all over again.

When I didn’t say a word, Elsie turned her attention to Antoinette and began undressing her. I watched her pull at buttons and yank at my doll’s dress.

“Stop—what are you doing? You’ll tear her clothes.” I reached for the doll, but Elsie kept me from rescuing her.

“I just want to see what she looks like naked.” Before I could stop her, Elsie took off my doll’s dress, petticoat, lace-trimmed bloomers, shoes, and stockings.

Her leather body and china limbs on display, poor Antoinette sprawled in Elsie’s lap. After examining the way the doll’s joints worked, Elsie turned her attention to Antoinette’s hair. “Is her wig made of real human hair or horsehair? It feels real—maybe it came from a dead person. Did you ever think of that?”

I shook my head. “I’m sure it didn’t,” I said, hoping I was right.

“She has a big hole in the top of her head, doesn’t she?”

“Yes, it’s where the doll maker put in her eyes and her teeth and her tongue.” Suddenly I was worried. I reached again for my doll, but Elsie held her tightly.

“It’s hidden under her hair, right?” To my horror, Elsie tugged at Antoinette’s wig as if she meant to pull it off and examine the hole.

“Don’t, you’ll ruin her!” This time I grabbed Antoinette’s leg and pulled. Her leg came loose in my hand, and Elsie threw the doll at me.

“Selfish, take her!” she cried as Antoinette flew over my head and hit the wall with a shattering sound.

I leapt up and scooped Antoinette into my arms. Her face was cracked, and her eyes had fallen back into her head. “Mama,” she cried “Mama.”

“It’s your fault,” Elsie said. “If you hadn’t pulled her leg off, I wouldn’t have dropped her.”

“You didn’t drop her, you threw her!”

“Did not.”

“Did too!”

Just then Mother called us to come downstairs. Leaving poor Antoinette on the bed surrounded by her pretty clothes, I ran down the steps with Elsie right behind me.

“You better not tell,” she hissed in my ear. “You’ll be sorry if you do.”

“Elsie,” Mother said, “it’s dark out. How far away do you live?”

Sniffing the good smells of roast chicken and fresh baked rolls, Elsie said, “Annie invited me to stay for dinner.”

Before I could say I’d done no such thing, Mother frowned at me. “Oh, Annie, you should ask before you invite a guest to stay.” Turning to Elsie, she said, “I’m sorry, dear, but I don’t have enough food for a fourth person. Maybe another time.”

Elsie looked sad, but she said. “Oh, that’s all right, Mrs. Browne. It’s not your fault.” Here she gave me a sly look. “I guess I should go. It’s a long walk from here. But don’t worry about me. I’m not afraid of the dark.”

Taking her sweater from the stand in the hall, she prepared to leave, but Mother stopped her. “Wait a minute, Elsie,” she said. “My husband will be here soon. He’ll be glad to take you home.”

Sure enough, I heard Father’s car in the driveway. In a few moments, he opened the front door and stepped inside. He looked at Elsie and then turned to me. “Well, well,” he said. “I see you’ve made a friend already.”

Elsie took my hand and squeezed it hard enough to hurt but not enough for anyone but me to notice. “As soon as I saw Annie, I just knew we’d be best friends.”

She squeezed my hand again, and I smiled weakly. My parents didn’t seem to notice my lack of enthusiasm at Elsie’s proclamation.

“Elsie,” Mother said. “if you tell Mr. Browne where you live, he’ll drive you home.”

“You have a *car?*” Elsie looked at Mother as if she’d said Father had a chariot drawn by six white horses. “I’ve never ridden in a car. Papa says we can’t afford it, what with the war and all.”

“I’ll be happy to give you your first ride,” Father said in that gallant way of his.

Elsie clapped her hands. “Can Annie come with us?”

“Of course she can.” Neither Mother nor Father thought to ask if I wanted to go. Nor did I say I didn’t want to go.

Elsie grabbed my sweater and handed it to me. Coward that I was, I trudged outside behind her and my father. The night was cool, and an autumn wind sent fallen leaves scurrying down the street. I glanced back at the warm light shining out our windows. Why hadn’t I spoken up and said I’d stay at home?

THREE

ELSIE INSISTED ON SITTING in the back seat with me so we could talk while Father drove.

"Your parents are so nice," she whispered. "I wish I could live with you. Do you think I could? You wouldn't be an only child, and neither would I. We'd be sisters and share everything."

Before I could stop myself, I said, "Are you crazy? Why would my parents adopt you? You're not an orphan, and even if you were—"

"I knew you'd say that—you don't want to share anything, do you? Not your stupid doll or your ugly teddy bear or anything else. You're a spoiled, selfish girl, and you're lucky to have me for a friend."

She sat back in the seat and stared out the window. For a few moments, she was silent. Then she turned away from the window and slid across the seat to my side. "Living at your house probably wouldn't be any better than living at my house. I'd just have nicer things."

"What do you mean?"

"How do your parents punish you?"

It was a strange question, but I answered anyway. "What all parents do, I guess. Mother scolds me, and Father has a talk with me about what I did and why I did it."

"Liar," Elsie said. "I bet your father whips you with his belt. And then he locks you in the basement and leaves you in the dark to think about it."

I stared at Elsie in disbelief. "My father would *never* do anything like that."

"Well, lucky, lucky you. It's what my papa does." She glared at me as if it were my fault she got beaten and I didn't. "And Hilda doesn't care. She never tries to stop him, even when I'm down on the floor begging and crying."

"You must be making that up," I whispered, shocked that she'd lie about her parents and scared she was telling the truth. "I can't believe your father could be that mean."

“Well, that’s why I want to live with you.” She grabbed my little finger and bent it back so far I winced in pain. “But if I can’t live with you, at least I can play at your house every day and be your best friend.”

With that, Elsie leaned over the seat to tap Father’s shoulder. “Turn at the next corner. My house is in the middle of the block.”

Father drove slowly down a street lined with narrow brick row houses. “Which one, Elsie?”

“This one.” She pinched my arm and said, “See you tomorrow, Annie. I can’t wait to play with your dollhouse.”

I rubbed my arm as I watched Elsie run up a few steps and open her front door. A man’s face looked down at her. His arm reached out and yanked her inside. Even from where I sat, I knew her father was angry. What if she’d told the truth? What if her father was whipping her right now?

It was too dreadful to think about. I climbed into the front seat beside Father. He smelled of pipe tobacco and hair cream, a special Father smell I loved. I liked the feel of his tweed overcoat and the way his hands held the steering wheel. Now that Elsie was gone, I felt safe.

“Well, she’s an odd little creature,” Father said.

“Yes, she is.” *Odder than you know,* I thought.

“She must like you very much to walk so far out of her way to see you.”

“I guess so.” I snuggled closer to him and took a deep breath of happiness. How lucky I was to have a father who’d never whip me or lock me in a cellar, no matter what I did. Not that I believed Elsie, of course. I already knew she was a liar.

When we were home, I ran up to my room and gathered Antoinette, her leg, and her torn and wrinkled clothing into a bundle. Cradling her in my arms, I wept over her as if she were a dead child, a child I’d killed without meaning to.

“It’s my fault,” I told her poor cracked face. “I should never have let Elsie hold you.”

“Mama,” Antoinette said.

I opened her little trunk, the one she’d come in one Christmas, and laid her among her silk dresses and cotton petticoats. Kissing her, I closed the lid and put the trunk in the back of the wardrobe. I didn’t want Mother to find her and ask what happened. Somehow Elsie would know if I told Mother the truth. And then she’d make me sorry—she’d said so.

Instead of going downstairs, I sat on my bed and hugged Edward Bear. Why had I thought Elsie and I could be friends? She'd driven the other girls away from me. She'd yelled at me because her mother was dead and mine wasn't. She'd wanted to rip Edward open to see how his growler worked. She'd broken Antoinette. She'd threatened to make me sorry if I told Mother about the doll.

And she'd pinched my arm so hard it still hurt. I rolled up my sleeve and looked at the bruise she'd made.

I hugged Edward tighter. How was I to get away from Elsie?

"Annie," Father called up the steps, "dinner is served."

I kissed Edward and sat him on my bed. It comforted me to think of him waiting there for me.

Slowly I went downstairs. I didn't touch the banister. Elsie had contaminated it with her hand. In fact she'd tainted my room and everything in it.

As Father passed my plate to me, he said, "You were so worried no one at Pearce Academy would like you, but you've made a friend already."

I nodded and began to cut up my chicken, hoping I'd be able to eat at least few mouthfuls.

Mother looked at me. "Your father says Elsie lives on the other side of town. I hope her parents weren't worried about her coming home after dark." She took a sip of water. "If you stayed out that late, I'd probably call the police."

"She didn't seem to think her parents would care," I said.

"I'm sure she was wrong." Mother ate a forkful of mashed potatoes and then said, "She's so different from the girls in our old neighborhood. I can't help wondering why you chose her for a friend."

Father sighed. "Now, Ida, don't be snobbish. You don't even know the girl."

Mother looked cross. "I'm not being snobbish," she said. "Elsie seems neglected, needy . . . Oh, I don't know how to say it. I feel sorry for her."

Father leaned toward me. "Well, Annie, what do you think about your new friend?"

I kept my head down and poked at my lima beans, a vegetable I truly hated. What was there to say about Elsie? That she'd broken my favorite doll? That she insisted on being my friend? That none of the girls at school liked her? That I didn't like her?

"She wanted to be my friend," I said at last. "No one else did."

"Well," Father said, "this was just the first day, Annie. Mark my words, once the others get to know you, you'll have so many friends you won't know what to do with them all."

Ha, I thought, *how will they get to know me with Elsie clinging to me like a leech?*

The subject changed to Pearce Academy. Did I like my teacher? *Too soon to tell,* I thought, but I told my parents she seemed nice. "She's not old and cranky like Miss Porter at Fairfield School. She's strict, though."

Mother asked if the curriculum was about right for me, neither too hard nor too easy. Again, it was too early to tell, but I said it was fine. "We had a spelling test, and I only had two wrong out of ten—a B."

Just as I knew he would, Father raised his eyebrows and said I could do better.

"Do you think you'll be happy at Pearce?" Mother asked.

If I can get rid of Elsie, I thought, but to them I said, "It's no better or worse than any other school, I imagine."

That seemed to be the end of their questions. Mother served apple pie and poured coffee for Father. Although I loved apple pie, I took a few bites and pushed it away.

Father looked at me. "You haven't eaten much tonight, Annie."

"It's my fault," Mother said. "I let the girls stuff themselves with cookies and cocoa. You'd think Elsie had never had such a treat in her life. I suspect she's not eating her dinner either."

After we cleared table, Mother and I washed and dried the dishes and then joined Father in the parlor. Even though it wasn't really cold enough yet, Father lit a fire. I cuddled on the sofa beside Mother. Father took a seat in his armchair and opened the evening paper. The fire popped and snapped. The room was cozy and warm.

For the first time since Elsie had left, I felt safe. She was gone. Maybe she wouldn't come back. Maybe I'd make new friends tomorrow.

I opened *Anne of Green Gables,* a book I'd already read more than once, and thought of redheaded Rosie dashing around the playground. She had a sparkle that reminded me of Anne, a promise of mischief and fun and jokes and secrets. If only I could be *her* friend.

Father looked up from the paper. "According to the *New York Times,* we're slowly making progress against the Germans. If all goes well, the war

might be over before Christmas."

Mother sighed and laid down her knitting. "It would be wonderful to have Paul home for the holidays. I worry about him constantly. The trenches, the nerve gas, the disease." She shuddered as if her words had brought the war into our cozy parlor. "So much suffering and pain and death. I wish this country had stayed out of the war."

"We've talked about this before," Father said. "We should have gone in when the Germans sank the *Lusitania*. The war would probably be over now if the president hadn't been such a pacifist."

"Wilson was wise to delay," Mother said. "Even more of our boys would be dead if he'd declared war sooner."

While my parents argued quietly, I worried about Uncle Paul. What if his name appeared on one of the lists of casualties posted every day in the newspaper? What if he never came home? Or what if he came home—but without his legs? What if he came home with "battle fatigue"? He could be a mental case from the gas the Germans used. I'd seen pictures in the paper. I knew how awful the war was.

I snuggled against Mother's side, comforted by her warmth. If only I could end the war with one big powerful wish and bring Uncle Paul back. And all the other Yanks as well.

As Rosie said, the Germans were dirty rotten Huns, and I hated them. Everyone did. Even Miss Harrison. If I ever met a German, I'd spit in his face.

FOUR

THE NEXT MORNING, Elsie was waiting for me at the school gate. As soon as she saw me, she pushed through the crowd of girls entering the schoolyard and ran across the street to meet me. “Were your parents angry about the doll?”

“I didn’t tell them.”

“I knew you wouldn’t tattle.” Elsie seized my hand and swung it as we crossed the street. “Your parents must be rich—all the things you have and the big house you live in. I’m so glad we’re friends.”

While the other students pushed past us, laughing and talking, Elsie pulled me aside. “I got in trouble for coming home late. Papa whipped me, and Hilda sent me to bed with no supper. But that’s not the worst of it.’”

She tightened her grip on my hand, and we walked up the school steps together. The other girls were all inside, and she paused at the door to look me in the eye.

“As part of my punishment, Papa says I can’t go anywhere for a week. That means you and I won’t be able to play at your house till next Monday.”

“Oh, that’s too bad.” I tried to sound truly disappointed, but not very deep inside, I was so happy I could have danced into our classroom.

Elsie’s eyes narrowed with suspicion. “Maybe you’re glad you won’t have to share your toys with me,” she said in a low, whiny voice. “Maybe you don’t want to be best friends after all.”

With a scowl on her face, she shoved the heavy school door open, darted inside, and let the door slam in my face.

I stood where I was for a moment, stunned. What kind of a friend was Elsie? She’d ruined my doll, she’d slammed a heavy door in my face. What would she do next?

The bell rang as I tugged the door open. In all my years at Fairfield, I’d never been late. This was only my second day at Pearce, and I was tardy. It seemed nothing was going well for me at my new school.

Alone and afraid, I walked down the empty hallway. By the time I reached my door, I saw the girls standing for the Lord's Prayer. Ignoring their turned heads and watchful eyes, I tiptoed into the cloakroom to hang up my coat.

"Girls," Miss Harrison said, "we shall wait until Annie Browne deigns to join us for the Lord's Prayer."

Humiliated, I slunk to my desk and stood beside it, so flustered I barely remembered the words of the prayer.

After we pledged our allegiance to the flag and prayed for the soldiers, Miss Harrison beckoned to me. Aware of the eyes tracking me, I walked to her big oak desk and waited with my head down.

"Do you have an excuse for being tardy, Annie?"

I felt Elsie staring at my back, her eyes like drills, daring me to say she'd slammed the door. "No, ma'am."

"I'll forgive you this time. After all, it's your second day with us, and you were only a few minutes late." She hesitated. "But I'll keep you in for recess today."

"Yes, ma'am, I'm sorry, ma'am. It won't happen again." I returned to my seat. It may sound strange, but I was happy to miss recess. I hadn't enjoyed walking around the playground with Elsie yesterday, and I was sure to enjoy it even less today.

For the rest of the week, I dreaded recess. Because my classmates continued to link me with Elsie, they disliked me. I watched them play onesies and foursquare, I watched them jump rope, I watched them chase one another and swing and seesaw—all things I loved to do, but Elsie kept my hand in hers and never gave me a chance to approach them.

"You're my best friend." She squeezed my hand so hard I winced. "You and me, best friends forever."

Rosie ran past us laughing. Lucy and Eunice chased her, but she outran them both. Grabbing an empty swing, she stood on the seat and pumped herself higher and higher. It looked as if she'd go right over the top.

Eunice took a swing from another girl and tried to go higher than Rosie, but she never got close.

Elsie gave me a hard nudge with her elbow. "Why are you watching that stupid showoff?"

Rosie chose that moment to launch herself out of the swing into the air. She landed in the dirt but got up laughing. She'd ripped the knees of her

stockings. “Dare you to jump!” she yelled at Eunice.

Eunice let the swing slow before she jumped. Even so, she sat down when she landed.

“I hate them both,” Elsie muttered. “Especially Rosie. I wish she’d broken her leg. It would’ve served her right, don’t you agree, Annie?”

I shrugged. Elsie took my hand and led me away from the swings. “Girls shouldn’t do things like that. They could hurt their insides.”

I wasn’t sure what Elsie meant, but I hoped she was wrong. I’d been jumping out of swings for years, and as far as I knew, my insides were fine.

On Monday, the very day she’d be allowed to visit me, Elsie didn’t come to school. When I noticed her empty seat, my heart flipped. I held my breath while Miss Harrison called roll. If Elsie didn’t show up soon, I was free to be on my own at recess. The thought scared me dizzy. Without my hand in Elsie’s and her mouth against my ear whispering things about them, would the girls see me differently?

At recess time, I delayed going to the cloakroom by sharpening my pencils, all five of them, even the ones that didn’t need it. By the time I made my appearance on the playground, everyone was swinging or seesawing or gathered in groups whispering secrets and laughing. Sure they were talking about me, I joined the crowd gathered around Rosie. She was bouncing a red rubber ball, and the girls were chanting, “Seven, eight, nine O’Leario, ten, eleven, twelve O’Leario.” With every bounce, Rosie swung her leg over the ball, caught it, and bounced it again.

One, two, three O’Leario was one of my favorite games at Fairfield. In fact, I was playground champion. I itched to take a turn when Rosie missed. Inching forward, I watched her closely. She was good. But no better than I was.

“Sixteen, seventeen, eighteen O’Leario,” the girls chanted. Rosie bounced and swung her leg, bounced and swung her leg, but finally on “twenty-seven O’Leario,” the sole of her shoe grazed the ball and she missed.

The crowd of girls cheered, and someone started singing, “For she’s a jolly good fellow, for she’s a jolly good fellow.”

With her face flushed and her blouse untucked, Rosie threw her arms up in the air and laughed. “Let’s see someone beat that!”

Before I could think about what I was doing, I stepped into the circle surrounding Rosie. “I can.”

A soul-killing silence fell. The girls stared at me and then began whispering to one another.

“Where’s your twin sister today?” Rosie asked.

I shrugged and looked at the ground. I’d made a mistake. But if I walked away now, they’d never be friends with me.

“Oooh,” Eunice said. “Get away from me—you have Elsie’s germs.”

“Cooties,” Lucy shouted, “Annie has cooties just like Fat Elsie.”

The girls all backed away, holding their hands over their mouths and noses.

“Oh, let her try.” Rosie tossed me the ball. “Let’s see how far you get.”

I missed the ball because I hadn’t expected her to throw it. The girls laughed and drew around Rosie and me in a circle.

“She’ll be out after one, two, three,” Eunice said.

“Give her a chance,” Jane said. Of all of the girls in my class, she was the sweetest. I’d never heard her say a mean word, not even to Elsie. I smiled at her, and she smiled back.

Okay, I said to myself, *I can do this. I’ll pretend I’m at Fairfield and these girls are my friends.*

Concentrating hard, I bounced the ball and began. At first I was the only one chanting, but by the time I got to ten, eleven, twelve O’Leario, Jane and a few others had joined me.

The sound of their voices encouraged me, and on I went on. When the count was “nineteen, twenty, twenty-one,” everyone was chanting.

The count reached twenty-seven, and still I hadn’t missed. On I went, past Rosie, all the way to thirty-three before I failed to catch the ball. I watched it bounce into the crowd and disappear.

For a moment, everyone stared at me in disbelief. If I’d expected them to cheer or sing “For Annie’s a jolly good fellow,” I’d have been very disappointed.

“I call for a rematch.” Eunice picked up the ball and tossed it to Rosie.

Rosie caught it but turned to me with a grin. “Good job, Annie Browne. Maybe we can have a rematch some other time.”

“Okay.” I smiled at her. Before I could say anything else, the bell rang, and we lined up at the school door.

Jane touched my hand. “You were really good,” she said. “I can never get past ten O’Learios. It just plain wears me out to swing my leg over that ball.”

“I played it all the time at my old school. It’s always been one of my favorite games.”

“I like jacks,” Jane said. “And pick-up sticks and tiddlywinks, games you sit down to play. I don’t get so tired.”

“They’re fun too.”

“How come you never played games at recess before?” Rosie asked.

I hadn’t noticed her standing behind me. “On my first day, Elsie made friends with me. She doesn’t like games. But I do.”

Rosie looked at me. “Who would you rather be friends with? Elsie or me?”

My face turned red. “You, of course.”

We linked pinky fingers and laughed. That’s how easy it was to toss Elsie aside and become part of Rosie’s gang.

Every day after that, I dreaded Elsie’s return to school. I didn’t know what she’d do when she saw me running around the playground with Rosie and her gang. Truthfully, I’d been a little scared of her since she’d ruined Antoinette. And the way she talked about her parents and the other girls in our class, even timid ones like Jane who never did anything to her. What would she do to me when she found I’d betrayed her?

The next week, Elsie showed up at the school gate. Her nose was red and running, and she had a balled up hanky in her fist. When she saw me, she began coughing loudly and dramatically.

“Oh, Annie,” she said, “I’ve been so sick. I thought you’d come to see me. I swear I had such a high fever the doctor said I was at death’s door. I have a delicate constitution, you know.”

Grabbing my hand with the same hand that held the germy handkerchief, she said, “I’ve missed you so much, but we can go to your house after school today and play with your dollhouse. That will make me feel so much better. Do you think maybe your mother will fix hot chocolate and give us cookies again?”

While Elsie prattled away, I grew more and more desperate. What was I to do? What was I to say? She thought we were still friends, she thought I wanted her to come to my house and probably destroy my dollhouse, but

she was wrong. She was never coming to my house again. Besides, I'd made plans to go to the candy store with Rosie and Jane after school.

And then Rosie was beside me, grinning at Elsie. "Look who's back. I was hoping I'd never see your fat, ugly face again."

Elsie moved closer me. "Leave me alone, Rosie O'Malley. I'm still weak from being sick. If you come any closer, I'll tell Miss Harrison."

"Ooooh, you and your big bad cooties!" Rosie gave Elsie a little push.

Elsie began to cough again. "I'm telling, I'm telling." She grabbed my hand and started pulling me toward the school steps.

"Let go of Annie!" Rosie slapped Elsie's hand. "In case you haven't noticed, she's my friend now."

Elsie stared at me. Her nose was running over her mouth, two thick yellow streams of germs. "That can't be true, Annie."

Without answering, I ran across the street with Rosie. "Charge," Rosie yelled as we dashed up the school steps. "Charge the hill!"

I didn't look back, but I imagined Elsie standing alone on the street, her nose running, watching me, her supposed best friend forever, deserting her.

I thought I'd feel worse than I actually did, but truly it was a relief to be rid of Elsie. No more damp hand holding mine, no more whining and complaining, no more visits to my house. I was free of Elsie forever!

FIVE

I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN that getting away from Elsie wasn't going to be as easy as I hoped.

For a week or two, my former so-called best friend followed me home from school and hung around our front gate. Mother would look outside and see her, sad and pale, swinging forlornly on the gate and watching the house as if waiting for me to come out and play.

"Elsie is out front again, Annie. She was here yesterday and the day before. Have you two quarreled?"

"Not exactly. I just don't like her anymore."

"Well, she seems to like you. Can't you be a little kinder and invite her inside or go out and play with her?"

Why didn't Mother understand? If I went out there, Elsie would *never* go away.

She and Father talked to me about it one night after dinner. It was a chilly evening, and Father lit a fire, but my parents ruined the atmosphere by bringing up Elsie.

"I feel so sorry for her," Mother said. "You'd think you were her only friend."

"I *was* her only friend. I told you no one at school likes her. She lies and cheats and tattles."

Mother and Father looked at each other. "So you dropped Elsie when you made friends with Rosie and Jane?" Father asked.

"You don't understand, Father. I never really liked her. She made me be her friend and then nobody else liked me."

"Are you sure Elsie deserves to be left out?" Mother asked. "She struck me as a sad and lonely girl. It must have hurt her to lose your friendship."

"I'll be right back." I ran upstairs and pulled Antoinette's trunk out of the wardrobe. Lifting my poor, battered doll from her hiding place, I carried her downstairs and laid her in Mother's lap.

“This is what Elsie did to Antoinette.” I began to cry at the sight of the doll’s ruined face.

“Oh, my goodness.” Mother held up the doll for Father to see.

Father shook his head. “I admit I found her a bit odd the night I drove her home. She sat in the back seat whispering to Annie. Secretive, I guess. I’m not surprised to learn she has no friends.”

“Oh, Horace,” Mother said, “can’t you be more compassionate? If you could see her out there, swinging on our gate and gazing at our house as if she’s longing to see Annie.”

“She does it to make me feel bad,” I shouted. “She thinks I’ll feel sorry for her and be her friend, but I won’t be her friend, no matter what she does!”

Father looked at me. “Annie, don’t raise your voice. I won’t have it. Please apologize to your mother.”

“I’m sorry,” I said in a low voice. “I shouldn’t have shouted, but you just don’t know what Elsie’s like. Or how I feel.”

Mother shook her head as if she had no more to say about Elsie. Stroking Antoinette’s hair, she said, “There’s a doll doctor in the city. I’m sure he can make Antoinette look as good as new.”

The next day, Rosie and Jane came home with me after school. From the corner, we saw Elsie swinging back and forth on the gate, looking forlorn as usual.

“What’s *she* doing at your house?” Rosie looked at me as if she suspected I harbored a secret friendship with Elsie.

“It’s not my fault. I didn’t invite her,” I said. “She shows up almost every day and waits for me to play with her. I never do, and after a while she gives up and goes home.”

“I’ll fix her wagon.” Rosie strode down the sidewalk with Jane at her side, begging her not to be mean.

But sometimes Mean was Rosie’s middle name. “Hey, get off that gate!” she yelled. “You’re so fat you’ll break it, and then your Hun father will have to buy a new one for the Brownes.”

Elsie hadn’t seen us coming. Rosie startled her so badly she almost fell off the gate. “My father’s not a Hun!”

“Herr Schneider, that’s what people call him. They say he sells horse meat in his butcher shop.” Rosie stepped closer. “Maybe even dog meat. He

saves the good stuff for his German friends."

"That's a lie!"

"Ask my pop, he'll tell you. Everybody but you must know the truth about your old man."

I glanced at Jane. She looked as surprised as I was. I'd never heard anything about the butcher shop except Schneider's high prices. Mother and Father often complained about that, especially when Mother cooked a roast full of fat and gristle so tough it made my jaws ache to chew it.

"You better leave me alone," Elsie whined.

Rosie laughed. "Who's going to make me?"

"I'll tell Annie's mother!"

Rosie stood face to face with Elsie, the gate between them. Without warning, Rosie shoved the gate and pushed Elsie back so hard she fell on the sidewalk. As she struggled to get up, she toppled forward and landed on her knees. While we laughed at her clumsiness, Elsie examined her torn stockings. "Now I'm really telling!"

"You better not tell *my* mother!" I gave her a push, but not hard enough to knock her down.

Elsie scrambled to her feet. "I hate you, Annie!" She was crying, and her nose was running, and I wished I hadn't shoved her.

But then she spat in my face, and I forgot to feel bad.

"Crybaby," Rosie shouted. "Run home to Mama!"

We watched Elsie go, getting smaller and smaller until she was no more than a distant dot. She had an odd way of running, clumsy, awkward, heavy on her feet, flapping her arms like a bird.

Rosie spit on her palms and rubbed them together. "She won't come back again."

And Rosie was right, at least for the time being.

A few days later, Rosie, Jane, and I were walking home from school. We'd stopped at the corner grocery store to buy dill pickles bigger than hot dogs. Mr. Walker kept them in a barrel and sold them to us wrapped in waxed paper. They were salty and sour and dripping with juice, but Rosie loved them, and so did Jane and I—though not quite as much as Rosie.

Sometimes Jane and I would have preferred to spend our pennies on peppermint sticks or Turkish toffee or licorice, but if Rosie wanted pickles, that's what we got because whatever she liked we liked.

On this particular day, we were talking about Elsie.

"Did you hear what she did to Polly today?" Rosie asked.

"She stole the sandwich right out of her lunch bag," I said. "And ate it at recess. I saw her stuffing it in her mouth like a starving child in Europe. When Miss Harrison asked who did it, everyone looked at Elsie, but she said it wasn't her."

"She's such a liar," Rosie said.

"Maybe she was hungry," Jane said softly. "Sometimes she comes to school without a lunch bag. Haven't you ever noticed?"

Rosie and I looked at each other. I hadn't noticed, and neither had she.

"Yes, but Polly's the smallest girl in our class," Rosie said, "and Elsie's the biggest. She should pick on kids her own size."

"There aren't any kids her size," I said. When Rosie laughed, I felt proud of myself.

"She's a typical Hun." Rosie licked pickle juice from her fingers and threw the wax paper into the gutter. "You know what Pop says about this flu people are getting? It's because of the Germans. They spread the germs. That's why we never buy meat from Herr Schneider. He coughs and sneezes and spits on everything."

"He was born in Germany, did you know that?" Jane asked. "It's why he's got that accent."

"Dat's vy Herr Schneider talks so funny," Rosie said, "him and his buddy der Kaiser."

We all laughed and started talking with German accents.

"Hey," Rosie said, "if you promise to keep it a secret, I'll tell you what my brother Mike and his friends did last night."

After Jane and I crossed our hearts and hoped to die, Rosie beckoned us closer. "They threw a rock through the butcher shop window," she whispered, "and then they wrote *Kaiser Lover* and *Dirty Hun* on the sidewalk."

Jane looked worried. "If anybody finds out what they did, they'll be in so much trouble."

Rosie shrugged. "They ought to get a medal," she said. "Everybody knows Herr Schneider wants the Kaiser to win the war."

I pictured Mr. Schneider—Herr Schneider—standing behind the meat case, wearing a bloodstained apron. He had the same squinty eyes as Elsie, but his nose looked like a big red potato stuck in the middle of his face. He

could easily be a spy, a tattletale just like Elsie, only on a much bigger scale, tattling war secrets to the Kaiser. Ooooh, it gave me shivers.

"Follow me!" Rosie darted down Third Avenue, and Jane and I ran after her.

"Where are you going?" I shouted.

"To the butcher shop." Rosie laughed and ran on, sure we'd follow her.

Jane shot me a worried look, but I ran so fast I caught up with Rosie and then dashed past her. Behind us I heard Jane shout, "Wait for me!"

At the butcher shop, we saw a crowd of boys yelling insults. The Hun stood in the doorway, wearing his bloody butcher's apron and shaking his fist. "You boys," he yelled. "I know who you are. I tell your parents. They pay for busted window!"

A board covered the broken glass. On it, someone had painted *HUN* in huge, badly written letters.

Rosie ran into the crowd and began singing our favorite patriotic song, and Jane and I joined in.

> *Over there, over there,*
> *Send the word, send the word over there—*
> *That the Yanks are coming,*
> *The Yanks are coming,*
> *The drums rum-tumming everywhere.*
> *So prepare, say a prayer,*
> *Send the word, send the word to beware.*
> *We'll be over, we're coming over,*
> *And we won't come back till it's over*
> *Over there.*

We sang that song every morning in school right after we pledged allegiance to the flag. Filled with patriotic spirit, we emphasized *Yanks* so Herr Schneider couldn't fail to get the meaning. It was such a good performance that the boys stopped jeering and sang with us.

But we didn't linger. Linking arms, we marched past Schneider's Butcher Shop and turned the corner. None of us, not even Rosie, wanted our parents to hear about our behavior.

We hadn't gone a block before we saw Elsie coming toward us eating a chocolate ice cream cone. She didn't see us until Rosie ran past her and

knocked the ice cream out of her hand.

Jane and I ran after Rosie, and I bumped Elsie so hard she almost fell down. “Hun!” we shouted. “Kaiser lover!”

We formed a circle around her. “Something stinks.” Rosie wrinkled her nose. “Fee fi fo fum, I smell the blood of a dirty Hun.”

Around and around we went, trapping Elsie in a circle and chanting, “Fee fi fo fum, I smell the blood of a dirty Hun!”

“I’m telling Miss Harrison!” she screamed.

“You better not, you big fat crybaby,” Rosie yelled. “We’ll get you if you do!”

With that, the three of us broke apart and ran down the street and around the first corner. When Elsie was out of sight, we sat down on a curb. We were hot and tired and thirsty. I’d have paid ten dollars for an ice-cold glass of Coca-Cola.

“Do you think she’ll tell?” Jane asked.

“So what if she does?” Rosie asked. “We’ll just say she’s lying. Everybody knows she lies about everything.”

“But what if Miss Harrison believes Elsie?” Jane asked, her forehead scrunched into wrinkles of worry.

We sat there for a while, thinking about the trouble we’d be in if Elsie convinced Miss Harrison we’d bullied her. She’d probably call our parents, and our parents—well, none of us dared to picture the punishments they might dish out for misbehaving in public.

Suddenly, Rosie jumped up. “Oh, my golly, I have to go home,” she said. “Ma told me to mind Bridget after school, and I totally forgot.”

Jane and I watched Rosie dash down the street, her red hair flashing in the afternoon sunlight. She lived six blocks away on the other side of town, but Jane lived near me, so we walked home together.

“Sometimes I feel sorry for Elsie,” Jane said. “It must be awful not to have any friends.”

“She brings it on herself, you know.” Even as I spoke, I remembered the way Elsie had looked at me, holding hands with Rosie—me, her former best friend, her only friend. I reminded myself of what she’d done to Antoinette, but I couldn’t erase the memory of Elsie’s face, her mouth smeared with chocolate ice cream, the sugar cone lying on the sidewalk, a dribble of melting ice cream puddled around it.

“It’s not her fault her father’s a German,” Jane said.

“Nobody liked her *before* the war,” I said. “At least that’s what Rosie says.”

“I guess that’s true. She’s always been—” Jane hesitated, trying to come up with the right word. “Different, I guess, as if she doesn’t know how to fit in. She’s on the outside, like that game we used to play when we were little—go in and out the window. Nobody wanted to be her partner. No matter what game we played, she was always the last to be chosen. It was kind of sad, but . . .”

By now we’d reached Jane’s corner. Before she turned to go home, she said, “I guess Elsie will always be Elsie. Maybe we shouldn’t pick on her so much.”

“Maybe,” I said, and she waved goodbye, leaving me to walk home alone.

Jane was just too nice sometimes. Rosie wasn’t about to stop picking on Elsie. And neither was I, even though I felt a bit guilty about it.

I scuffled home through the piles of fallen leaves, thinking about the coming weekend and what Rosie and Jane and I might do. Sometimes we roller-skated down High Street, which was very steep and scary, but Rosie led the way and we followed. So far I had plenty of scabs on my knees from falls, but nothing worse.

If we didn’t feel like roller-skating, we’d seesaw and swing in the park or play one, two, three O’Leario. Rosie and I either tied or one of us edged the other by one or two points. There were trees to climb and creeks to follow and woods to explore. If it rained, we’d go to the library and look for Tom Swift adventure books. Every once in a while, we found one we hadn’t read. Rosie liked Zane Grey’s western novels, and we acted them out in the park, riding make-believe horses and shooting make-believe guns.

Rosie always had ideas. She was never bored, and neither were we. She was the best friend I’d ever had.

SIX

AFTER SUPPER ONE NIGHT, Mother, Father, and I gathered in the living room as usual. Mother picked up the sweater she was knitting for me. The yarn was soft, and its color matched my eyes. Despite the lingering heat, I could hardly wait for her to finish it.

I settled down beside her with *Anne of Green Gables.* I was already halfway through it, and still thinking how much alike Rosie and Anne were. Maybe it was their red hair that made them so mischievous. I twirled a strand of my hair around my finger. Brown. Such a boring color. If only it were red. I couldn't imagine why Anne hated her hair when I would have traded my heart and soul for it.

Father sat nearby in his armchair reading the *Evening Sun.* Suddenly he laid the paper down and looked at Mother. "It says here that the influenza epidemic is getting worse. Over *five hundred* cases were reported today in Philadelphia alone. The numbers are increasing in Baltimore, as well. As for New York and Boston, the hospitals don't have room for more patients, and undertakers are running out of coffins. In some places, they stack the bodies up in piles until they can bury them properly."

I stared in horror at Father. Dead bodies in piles? Were they outside where everyone could see them? No, they couldn't be. They must keep them in hospital basements or somewhere private. Morgues maybe. The very word made me shiver. How would I go to sleep tonight?

Mother didn't look up from her knitting. "Oh, Horace, you're frightening Annie. You know as well as I do how reporters exaggerate. The number is probably less than half what the newspapers say. As for bodies stacked in piles, that's ridiculous." She reached over and patted my hand.

Father shook his head. "It's very contagious, Ida, and there's no cure."

Mother frowned and laid down her knitting. "The flu comes and goes every year. Very few people die of it. In a month or so, it will be over, and so will the war, and everything will be back to normal."

“I’m not so sure.” Father sighed and returned his attention to the newspaper. “This isn’t the regular flu. It’s much worse.”

Mother hugged me. “Don’t let your father worry you, Annie. If you catch the flu, you’ll be well again in a week or less.”

I hoped Mother was right, but no matter what she said, over five hundred cases in one day sounded worrisome to me. And if hospitals didn’t have room for them, where would sick people go? And how long would the dead wait to be buried?

At recess the next day, we gathered in groups and talked about the Spanish influenza. All of a sudden, it was even bigger news than the war. And much closer to home. People were dying in Baltimore. Mount Pleasant was just outside the city.

“Our minister says it’s God’s punishment for the war in Europe,” Eunice said.

“If that’s true, only the Germans should catch it,” Rosie said. “They started the war. They’re the ones who ought to be punished.”

Lucy shook her head. “My father says it’s like the bubonic plague. It could wipe out almost the entire human race.”

Rosie shook her head. “I don’t believe that.”

“My father knows more about it than you, Miss Smarty,” Lucy said. “He’s a *doctor.*”

“Nobody has died in Mount Pleasant,” Polly Anderson said.

“Then how come I saw a funeral procession on the way to school this morning?” Eunice asked. “Six black horses were pulling a hearse on Prospect Street, and at least six carriages followed it.”

“I saw a black wreath on somebody’s door on Maple Street,” Lucy added. “That means somebody died in that house.”

“My pop says you can feel perfectly fine in the morning,” Rosie put in. “But then in the afternoon you start feeling bad, and by that night, you’re *dead*.”

“Can’t we talk about something else?” Jane asked. No one paid any attention to her. It seemed almost every one had something to say about the influenza.

While we were talking, I noticed Elsie sitting a few feet away listening to us. The October sunlight glinted on her blond braids, turning flyaway wisps white.

Suddenly she turned her head and caught me looking at her. Our eyes locked. I couldn't look away. It was if she'd put a spell on me.

"What are *you* looking at?" Rosie asked Elsie.

"Nothing." Elsie stood up and walked away, and the spell broke.

Jane took my hand and peered into my eyes. "Are you all right, Annie?"

"I'm fine. Why?"

"I don't know. You have that look my mother talks about. You know, as if someone walked on your grave."

"That's creepy, Jane."

The bell rang and we hurried to form a line at the school door. While we filed into the classroom, my legs trembled, and I was glad to take my seat.

I didn't look at Elsie for the rest of the day, but I felt her eyes crawling up and down my back. Let her stare. I'd never be her friend again.

The next day at recess, Rosie taught us a new jump rope chant:

I had a little bird,
And its name was Enza.
I opened up the window,
And in flew Enza.

At first nobody understood the joke, so Rosie had to explain. "It's about catching the flu. In flew Enza—*influenza*."

"Oh," Eunice said. "The little bird flies in your window, and you get the flu."

"That's right," Rosie said. "Go to the head of the class."

Lucy and Jane grabbed the jump rope and started turning, faster and faster. We ran in and skipped rope while the others chanted the Enza rhyme. When we missed, we caught flu and had to lie down on the ground and pretend to be dead.

Shivering with fear that I'd miss, I ran in, jumped without missing, and ran out of the rope's swing. "Hooray for me," I cried. "Enza didn't get me!"

Polly came after me and missed. She fell on the ground and cried, "Alas, I am dead and cannot take the math test tomorrow!"

Rosie laughed when it was her turn. "Enza can't catch me," she shouted as she jumped in, skipped rope, and darted out again. "I'm too fast for Enza," she boasted.

Elsie watched us from the sidelines. Looking directly at Rosie, she shouted, “I hope you catch the flu. You won’t brag then.”

“Dirty Hun,” Rosie shouted back. “You’re the one who should get the flu, not me. You’re too fat to get away from Enza.”

“I hope you die of the flu!” Elsie screamed. “It would serve you right!”

Forgetting jump rope, we all began yelling at Elsie. She retreated to the school’s front steps before yelling back at us. We called her names. She called us names. All the girls joined in, shouting Elsie down. Louder and louder, insults bounced off the wall.

Miss Harrison opened the school door and saw what was happening. “Girls, girls!” she cried. “This is not the way Pearce students behave!”

“Rosie started it,” Elsie shouted. “She said I was fat and she hoped I died of the flu!”

Miss Harrison frowned at Rosie. “Shame on you for saying such a hateful thing.”

“Elsie’s lying,” Eunice shouted. “*She’s* the one who started it. She said she hoped Rosie would die of the flu.”

“You’re the liar!” Elsie’s round face turned red with anger. “I didn’t say that!”

We all began shouting then. Elsie was a Hun. Her father loved the Kaiser, she loved the Kaiser, she was a stinking, dirty German, and she was spreading flu germs all over school.

Miss Harrison looked shocked and angry. “I will not tolerate this behavior. Line up and return to the classroom immediately.”

As we got into line, Rosie muttered, “Recess is over early, and it’s all Elsie’s fault.”

Once we were seated at our desks, Miss Harrison said, “I know you’re worried about the flu, girls. Maybe we should talk about it. Does anyone have a question?”

Theresa Luciano raised her hand first. “My aunt says everybody who gets flu dies. Is that true?”

“Of course not, Theresa. Many people recover, but we hear more about the ones who die. Sometimes I think newspapers like to scare us.”

“That’s just what my mother says,” I told Miss Harrison.

“What are the symptoms?” Eloise Murphy asked.

“From what I understand, it begins like any other flu—fever, fatigue, muscle and joint pain, headache, lack of appetite. Maybe a cough and a

runny nose." Miss Harrison paused a moment. "It's just that the symptoms are more severe than normal, as is the flu itself."

Rosie raised her hand. "My pop says big cities are closing schools. Will our school close?"

"In many cities, they've closed theaters, department stores, and other places where large crowds gather—including schools."

"But *this* school." Rosie leaned forward eagerly. "Will *this* school close?"

"It's under discussion," Miss Harrison said. "The public schools closed yesterday, so I wouldn't be surprised if we follow suit."

Rosie sat back and grinned. "No more homework," she whispered to Jane in a voice loud enough for all of us to hear.

"Well," Elsie said, "I hope school stays open. Education is important, isn't it, Miss Harrison?"

Miss Harrison said, yes, of course it was. "But if our health is endangered, the school will close." She had to speak loudly to make herself heard over the murmur of dislike directed at Elsie.

After school, Rosie, Jane, Lucy, Eunice, and I headed to the corner grocer for candy. Turkish toffee was my current favorite, but the others were in favor of licorice—black for Rosie and red for Jane, Eunice, and Lucy.

Rosie chewed a big mouthful and opened her mouth wide. "Look, my teeth are black!"

"Mine are red," Lucy shouted. "Oh, I'm bleeding, help me, I'm bleeding to death!"

"Call for the doctor," I yelled. "Call for the nurse!"

Rosie, Eunice, and Jane joined in for the third line. "Call for the lady with the alligator purse!"

Lucy staggered about, gasping as if she were dying. Our laughter rang against the brick walls of the houses. "Oh, no, it's the flu!" Rosie screamed. "Enza got Lucy!"

Just as Lucy fell down dead on the sidewalk, a door flew open and a woman came out on the front step. "Stop that noise this minute. Don't you girls have any respect? People are sick in this house. They need rest!"

For once, no one had anything smart to say, not even Rosie. Lucy leapt to her feet, and we all ran across the street and around a corner.

Ahead of us, a horse-drawn hearse waited in front of a house with a funeral wreath on its door. We stopped so fast we almost fell over each other. I tried to look away, but my eyes took in every detail—the hearse's

ornate carvings, its shiny black paint, the sleek black horses, the black plumes on their heads, the driver in his black top hat, black overcoat, and white gloves.

Two men dressed in black came down the front steps carrying a coffin and slid it into the back of the hearse. The horses shuffled their feet and showed the whites of their eyes as if they knew death was in the box.

Rosie and Jane bowed their heads and made the sign of the cross. Lucy, Eunice, and I whispered a prayer.

The family followed the coffin down the steps. Mother, father, and two girls, all four dressed in black. Supported by her husband's arm, the woman sobbed into a handkerchief. They climbed into a black carriage behind the hearse. Slowly, with great dignity, the horses walked past us. We watched the procession until it disappeared around a corner.

"Oh, mercy, that's the Jenkinses' house," Jane whispered. "Their son is my brother's age." She looked at us. "He wasn't with them, just his big sisters. Do you think Charlie died?" Her voice dropped, and she began to cry.

We gathered around Jane to comfort her. When she stopped crying, we walked slowly toward home. No one laughed, no one sang about Enza or the lady with the alligator purse. We passed two more funeral wreaths.

At one house, three women dressed in black knocked at a door. A woman with a sad face welcomed them inside. "Thank you for coming," the woman said as the door closed behind them.

"It's a viewing," Eunice whispered. "The dead person is right there in the parlor, so people can view him."

"Oh, no, that's awful. I could never go in a house and see a dead person in a coffin." Jane reached for my hand. Hers was cold, but I held it tightly. Enza had come to Mount Pleasant, bringing death with her.

"Have any of you seen a dead person?" Rosie asked.

"When my grandma died, I was only five," Lucy said, "but my mother made me kiss her goodbye. She was cold and hard, like a statue." She shuddered. "I had nightmares for weeks afterward."

"I saw my Uncle Bert," Rosie said. "We had the wake at our house. Everybody talked and told stories and sang. It was a big party. They ate enough to feed the city of Baltimore, Ma said, and the men got so drunk they could scarcely walk. They forgot about poor Uncle Bert all alone in the

spare room. I went in and looked at him, but I was too scared to get closer than the doorway."

Jane, Eunice, and I had never been to a viewing, much less seen a dead person, so we had no stories to add.

We walked another block before coming to the corner where we split up to walk our separate ways home.

"Wait a minute," Rosie said. "I have an idea."

We turned to her, all four of us, and waited. Rosie hesitated a moment, almost as if she thought we might not like what she was about to say.

"I was just thinking about my uncle's wake and all the food—especially the cakes and pies and cookies and candy. Yes, chocolate candy, the kind that comes in fancy boxes, and some are delicious and others you spit out when nobody's looking."

We nodded. Everybody knew that kind of candy. It appeared at Christmas usually. Just thinking about it made my mouth water.

"Well." Rosie paused again. "What if we went to viewings and pretended we knew the dead person? Just think about all the sweets we'd get."

"Oh, Rosie, no," Jane said. "We can't go to a viewing just to get sweets."

"We'd be taking advantage of people." That's what I said, but I really meant I didn't want to see dead people or be in the same house where someone died of the flu—what if their germs were still in the furniture and the drapes and the carpet and maybe even the refreshments?

"We'd be pretending to know the dead person," Jane added. "And that's the same as lying."

"We won't be doing anything wrong," Rosie said. "We'll tell people how sorry we are, we'll talk about how nice the dead person was, we'll make the mourners feel better. That's not taking advantage, that's not lying."

"We'll be polite and well behaved." To demonstrate, Lucy lowered her head piously.

Eunice nodded. "And then we'll have some refreshments and leave."

"And just think of the money we'll save if we get free candy instead of buying it at the corner grocery," Rosie said.

Eunice looked at Jane. "Nobody said you have to come with us. Or you either, Annie. You can spend your allowance on candy if you want to."

She and Lucy stood on either side of Rosie, their arms linked with hers. I gave Jane a worried look. "We didn't say we weren't coming, we just—"

"You're just scared to see a dead person," Rosie said.

Jane and I drew closer together. In the look that passed between us, we read each other's minds. If we backed out of Rosie's plan, Lucy and Eunice would take our places as Rosie's best friends.

"Think of the cakes," Eunice said, "and the cookies."

"And the chocolate candy with caramel or nougat in the middle." Rosie smacked her lips.

Think of the coffin, I wanted to add, *standing in a dark corner, its top open so everyone can see the dead body. Think of the flu germs in the cake.*

"So everyone is in?" Rosie asked.

Jane and I nodded slowly. We were in, mainly because neither of us wanted to be out.

"Well," Rosie said, "it's almost suppertime. Read the obituaries tonight. Tomorrow we'll pick which houses to visit."

Rosie ran down Prospect Street toward home. The rest of us turned the corner and headed up Hill Street. Eunice and Lucy chattered about the sweets we'd have, but Jane and I said little. I sensed she was just as worried as I was.

After Eunice and Lucy went their way, Jane squeezed my hand. "Do you think we should meet them tomorrow?"

"If we don't, Rosie won't be friends with us."

Jane sighed. "We have to stick together, don't we?"

"We won't look at the dead person, we won't even get near the coffin," I said. "We'll just eat a cookie and leave."

"Maybe she'll change her mind," Jane said. "Maybe we won't have to do it after all."

We both knew there was no chance of that. Once Rosie made up her mind, it stayed made up. And besides, she loved sweets. How could she resist the opportunity to get them for free?

I waved goodbye to Jane and trudged down Portman Street alone. It was almost dark. A cold wind stirred the fallen leaves. They seemed to rise up and follow me, tip tapping like ghostly shoes on the sidewalk, whispering among themselves.

I walked faster, suddenly afraid of the leaves scurrying at my heels. I wanted to look over my shoulder, but I was scared of what I might see following close behind me. It was as if the ghosts of Enza's victims had risen from their graves to carry me away with them, far from my home, my parents, my friends, my life.

Tomorrow I'd say no to Rosie. I wouldn't go near the dead, not for all the free sweets in the world.

SEVEN

THE NEXT DAY I came downstairs dressed for school only to be told Pearce Academy was closed until the flu ran its course.

"The department stores on Main Street are closed too," Mother said, "and so are the churches and movie theaters. No Liberty Bond parade this weekend either."

I sat down and stared at her. "No school?" I'd worked past bedtime on the report due today. Now it seemed I might as well have read *Riders of the Purple Sage* instead.

"Two hundred and eighty-nine people died in Philadelphia yesterday." Mother wrung the dishcloth in her hands, letting the water drip on the floor. "That's almost three hundred people in one day, Annie."

I stirred sugar into my oatmeal. When I swallowed the first spoonful, my throat felt scratchy. I was tired, listless. Appetite gone, I pushed my bowl away.

"What's wrong, Annie?" Mother asked. "Don't you want your oatmeal?"

I shook my head. "I don't feel well. I think I'm getting sick."

Mother felt my forehead, her way of checking my temperature. "You're as cool as a cucumber," she said with a smile. "You're worried about the flu, aren't you?"

"It comes on very quickly, you know."

"Yes," Mother said. "But we mustn't dwell on it. It's bad for you.

"Maybe we should wear flu masks. Lots of people have them now."

Mother laughed. "Don't be silly. Your father says those things are worthless. That flimsy little piece of gauze won't stop germs."

Still feeling a little uncertain about my health, I returned to my room and changed into play clothes. Perhaps I'd take it easy today. Stay home. Rest. I'd tell Rosie I couldn't go to any viewings because I was sick.

I'd no sooner curled up with *Purple Sage* than I heard the doorbell chime. Mother called upstairs to say Jane was there. I laid the book down as Jane came running up the steps.

“We’re supposed to meet Rosie and the others at noon in front of 28 Prospect Street,” she told me.

“How do you know that?”

“Rosie telephoned. She tried to call you too, but Mrs. Cooper was hogging your party line with gossip about the flu.”

Now was the time to tell Jane I wasn’t going, but if I stayed home and everyone else went, they’d think I was scared. They might tease me. They might even stop being friends with me. Then what would I do?

So I followed Jane downstairs. Mother stopped us at the door to ask where we were going.

“Oh,” I said, trying to sound casual, “we’re meeting Rosie, Lucy, and Eunice at the park.”

It was the first time I’d ever lied to Mother, and I was shocked to discover how easy it was.

“Have fun,” Mother called after us. “It’s a lovely day. Enjoy the sunshine and fresh air.”

As soon as the front gate closed behind us, Jane asked, “Are you scared?”

“Oh, perhaps little bit.” Another lie—I was terrified. “Are you?”

“Yes,” Jane said. “I’m not going near the coffin. I’ll sit on the other side of the room. I doubt I’ll be able to eat anything. It’s just not right.”

“We could always say we’re not going.”

“We have to go, Annie. We said we would.”

Holding hands, we walked toward Prospect Street. “Do you think we’re dressed all right?” Jane asked.

We were both wearing play clothes. My dress was dark blue with a dropped waist and a sailor collar, and Jane’s was black and white plaid with a pleated skirt. We wore long black stockings and high-top button shoes, and our hair was combed and held back with ribbons tied in big bows.

“I hope so,” I said. “We can’t very well go out to play in our Sunday best.”

No matter how slowly we walked, we came to Prospect Street. Rosie, Lucy, and Eunice were waiting in front of a house with a big black wreath on the door. We paused and took a deep breath. While we hesitated, several mourners passed us and climbed the front steps. They knocked softly. As the door opened, the murmur of voices drifted out of the house.

“Look sad,” Rosie told Jane and me. “Tell Mrs. O’Neil how sorry you are to learn of her daughter’s passing—”

“Don’t say death or dying,” Eunice butted in. “It’s rude.”

Rosie led us up the steps. “I hope they have something good, chocolates maybe,” she whispered, and then knocked softly.

The door opened, and a woman with a kind but sorrowful face welcomed us inside.

“We are so sad about Agnes,” Rosie said. “We’ll miss hearing her sing in the church choir.”

“Thank you, dear.” Mrs. O’Neil pressed Rosie’s hand between hers.

The parlor was crowded with people, all strangers to us, speaking in low voices. Followed by Lucy and Eunice, Rosie approached the coffin, which rested on a platform in a little alcove that might have been designed exactly for that purpose. She pinched my arm and gave Jane and me a warning look.

I glanced at Jane, and she at me. With a small shrug, or perhaps it was a shiver, Jane walked slowly to the coffin with me close behind. Rosie stood beside it, looking like a statue in the cemetery, her head slightly lowered and a pious expression on her face. All she needed was a pair of wings sprouting from her shoulder blades.

Although I lingered behind Jane and did not look too closely, I glimpsed a pale but beautiful face, eyes closed, hair arranged in a swirl of dark curls across a satin pillow. Agnes didn’t look exactly alive, but she didn’t look exactly dead either. In truth, she was not as scary as I’d imagined she’d be. I felt overwhelmingly sad to see her lie so still. My eyes brimmed with tears, and I turned away.

“There, there.” A woman gave me a little hug. “Don’t be sad, dear. Agnes is at peace with the Lord.”

At first I thought she said Agnes was at the beach with the Lord, and I stared at her in amazement. Then I understood and lowered my eyes.

“Would you like some cake?” the woman asked.

I followed her to a table covered with an embroidered cloth and laden with food—slices of yellow cake with rich chocolate icing, dozens of sugar cookies, gingersnaps, and dainty madeleines, a big crystal bowl of red punch.

“Help yourself, sweetheart.”

I wasn’t hungry, but to be polite, I took a small slice of cake and retreated to a corner as far away from the coffin as possible.

Jane joined me. She'd taken a piece of cake and a cookie, but like me she toyed with the food.

Across the room, Rosie was talking to Mr. and Mrs. O'Neil about Agnes and her lovely voice that no one would ever hear again and wasn't that the saddest thing.

"How does she know so much about Agnes?" I whispered to Jane.

"She read the obituary," Jane whispered back.

The next time I looked her way, Rosie was talking about Agnes's charity, how she gave to the poor and helped with fundraising for wounded veterans coming home from Europe, and volunteered in a school for immigrant children.

"I plan to use Agnes as a model," Rosie told the weeping O'Neils. "I will do my best to emulate her and take up charity work myself."

Lucy joined us, her face flushed with suppressed laughter. "I think we should leave before I lose my self control and burst into a fit of giggles."

Eunice tugged at Rosie's arm and whispered something to her. "Oh yes, oh thank you for reminding me, Eunice."

Turning back to the O'Neils, she told them once again of her admiration for Agnes and apologized for needing to leave. "I have a dental appointment," she told them.

The O'Neils hugged Rosie and thanked her for coming and claimed her remarks had done them a world of good. The crowd of mourners looked our way and smiled tenderly. I could almost hear them thinking what sweet, well-behaved girls we were.

Once we were outside, I took a deep breath. "How could you tell them all those things, Rosie? You never saw Agnes O'Neil until today, and her lying in her coffin, at that."

Rosie looked surprised. "You heard what the O'Neils said. I made them feel better. How can you find fault with that?"

"And we made ourselves feel better," Eunice added, "by stuffing ourselves with sweets."

Eunice was already plump, but I didn't tell her what I thought—if she kept eating sweets at viewings, she'd need a new wardrobe before Christmas.

After that, we attended at least two viewings a day. With schools and stores and movie theaters closed, what else were we to do?

The dead were strangers, mostly young because that was who Enza preferred—young people in their teens and twenties, some older and some younger, a few much older and a few much younger. The saddest was a toddler barely three years old. She looked like a baby doll, and I was tempted to pick her up and rock her.

Yes, I'd gotten quite used to the dead, so silent, so still, nothing frightening about them after all.

We took care to memorize obituaries so we'd say the right things. How talented artistically or musically, how charitable, how courteous and thoughtful. Never angry. Never mean. No wonder the Lord took them to his bosom, saving them perhaps from future misery.

At night I'd lie in bed and wonder what people would say of me if I died of the flu. I was pretty certain I'd be portrayed as saintly as the other dearly departed. Unless they asked Elsie. She'd make up horrible stories about me. She'd say I was a bad friend. She'd say I was mean to her. She'd lie and say I cheated on tests and copied my homework and stole candy from the corner grocery.

Oh, yes, if I died, Elsie would make up plenty of bad things to say about me.

EIGHT

ONE DAY in that awful autumn of death and funerals and fear, we were walking home from a particularly dreadful viewing—identical twin girls, six years old, laid out in the same coffin, their arms around each other as if they were sleeping. We hadn't stayed long enough to eat more than one cookie.

Jane was still crying when Rosie stopped so suddenly I bumped into her. "Look who I see."

She pointed at the park across the street. Elsie was sitting in a swing all by herself, spinning idly, too lazy to push off and soar treetop high.

Lucy giggled. "She's wearing a flu mask."

"Too bad it doesn't hide her whole ugly face," Eunice said.

We started to walk on, but Rosie remained where she was and stared hard at Elsie. "She got me in trouble the last day of school. Let's get even."

Before we could agree or disagree, Rosie charged across the street, whooping like an Indian on the warpath. We followed her, whooping as loudly as we could.

Elsie looked up and saw us coming. She jumped out of the swing and began to run across the park. She was big, but she was clumsy and she couldn't run fast enough to escape us. Rosie caught her, yanked off her flu mask, and put it on her own face.

"Enza's coming for you!" she said to Elsie. "She's going to fly in your window tonight. By tomorrow morning, you'll be dead!"

"And no one will be sorry. No one will miss you," Lucy added, "because nobody likes you."

"You're mean and you're a liar and you're a big fat Hun!" Eunice yelled.

At that, Rosie told us to join hands in a circle, trapping Elsie inside. Round and round we went, faster and faster, chanting,

I had a little bird,
And its name was Enza.

I opened up the window,
And in flew Enza.

The faster we went, the faster we sang, laying particular emphasis on "in flew Enza."

Elsie ran against us, trying to break her way out of the circle, but we held firm. She couldn't escape. "Let me out," she cried. "I want to go home!"

"In flew Enza, in flew Enza," we shouted. "Had a little bird, name was Enza, opened window, IN FLEW ENZA!"

"I'll tell my mother on you!"

"I'll tell my mother on you, I'll tell my mother on you," Rosie echoed in a perfect imitation of Elsie's voice.

We were hysterical, we couldn't stop. Even when Elsie sank to the ground, crying, we couldn't stop. Round and round and round her, we ran screaming "IN FLEW ENZA," until our throats were sore and we were almost too dizzy to stand up.

Finally we broke apart and reeled across the grass, falling into piles of autumn leaves, gasping for breath.

For a moment, Elsie crouched on the ground. She seemed smaller somehow, a rabbit caught by a pack of dogs. Suddenly she looked up and caught me staring at her. Our eyes locked just as they had before. This time, I turned away quickly, ashamed of myself, of all of us.

Elsie scrambled awkwardly to her feet and ran, her arms flapping, knock-kneed, as clumsy as a baby elephant, only much more pathetic.

Following Rosie's lead, we chased Elsie again, shouting and jeering, myself included, despite my guilty feelings.

"You can't run from Enza," Rosie yelled.

We stopped on the edge of the park and watched Elsie cross Prospect Street. She ran more slowly now, her head down. One braid had come loose, and the bow on her dress was untied. She looked so pitiful I turned my head away, afraid she'd catch me staring again. I couldn't bear the sadness in her eyes.

"Run, baby, run!" Rosie shouted. "Run home to Mama!" Turning to us with a laugh, she said, "I guess we taught her a lesson!"

She was still wearing Elsie's mask, and it made her look scary.

Lucy snatched the mask from Rosie and put it on. Eunice grabbed it from Lucy. Rosie tried to get it back.

Jane and I watched the three girls play keep away with the mask, but we didn't join in. For both of us, the fun had gone out of the day.

At last Rosie tossed the mask aside as if it were a dead rat. "Let's go," she said.

Without linking arms, we walked slowly across the park, almost deserted in the late afternoon light. Rosie started singing the Enza song, but only Eunice joined in.

I found myself thinking of Elsie crouched on the grass, as helpless as a baby bird. To keep from feeling sorry for her, I reminded myself of what she'd done to my doll and the times she'd tried to get me in trouble with Miss Harrison.

Yes, I thought, *Elsie deserved what we'd done to her.*

But why did the sight of her flu mask lying in the leaves make me feel sad?

Less than a week later, we were walking down Third Avenue. November had arrived and brought the promise of winter with it. A cold wind sneaked up behind us and crept through the gap between our collars and our necks. It pinched our noses and the tips of our fingers. It seeped up from the pavement, right through the soles of our shoes, and chilled our toes.

We planned to go to a viewing on the other side of the park, a long walk on such a windy day.

"I hate cold weather," Eunice grumbled.

"But not if it snows," Rosie said. "Since school's closed, we can sled ride all day long." She grinned. "Pop says the *Farmer's Almanac* is calling for tons of snow and a long winter."

"And don't forget the woolly bear caterpillars," Jane said. "Every one I've seen has a really narrow brown stripe."

"Ugh." Eunice shivered. "I hope the almanac is wrong, wrong, wrong."

While we stood on the corner, a funeral procession came toward us. We waited on the curb and watched a pair of black horses walk slowly past, pulling the hearse. Their glossy necks arched, the black plumes on their heads waved in the breeze. Through the glass windows, I saw the coffin heaped with flowers. Behind it came a long procession of mourners, walking slowly, solemnly. They said nothing, but stared straight ahead. It scared me to watch them coming toward us, each step measured, their faces grim.

“Somebody important must have died,” Eunice said.

“It’s probably the mayor,” Lucy said. “Father is his doctor. *Was* his doctor, I mean. He told us he’d died.”

As soon as the last mourner passed by, Rosie said, “I guess he won’t be boring the whole town with a long speech this Fourth of July.”

“Don’t be disrespectful,” Lucy said.

Rosie shrugged. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m cold and hungry, and I don’t feel like walking all the way to the other side of the park. Let’s go to that house and get something to eat.”

She pointed at a wreath on a door in the middle of the block. It was a small, shabby house in a row of small and shabby houses, and the wreath was so small we could have easily missed seeing it.

“It’s not on our list,” Eunice said.

“We don’t know who lives there or who died,” Jane added. “We might say the wrong thing.”

“We’ve been doing this for three weeks now,” Rosie said. “We’ll make it up as we go along."

Jane and I exchanged looks, but before we had a chance to protest, Rosie walked boldly up the steps and knocked on the door.

A stern-looking woman invited us inside. “Thank you for coming. You must be my daughter’s classmates.”

“We’re so sorry,” Rosie said, not pausing for a second. It was if she’d memorized a script suitable for all occasions. “We’ll miss her so much. She was so sweet. Everyone adored her.”

I caught Eunice eying the refreshments and hoped the woman wouldn’t notice.

“Come and say goodbye to her,” the woman said.

All five of us arrived at the coffin at the same moment. No longer afraid to look at the dead, we leaned over the side to stare at the body. We all gasped, even Rosie, and backed away, almost tripping over our own feet.

Jane grabbed my hand and began to cry. I held her hand tightly, sure I was about to faint. To swoon. To collapse. My legs shook, and my arms trembled.

“You girls look frightened,” the woman said. “Have you never seen a dead person?”

“It’s such a shock,” Rosie whispered, sounding sincere for once. Her face was so pale every freckle stood out. “We saw her just a few days ago.”

Yes, I thought, *we saw her.* We chased her and made her our prisoner. We scared her with the Enza song, and Rosie told her she'd die that very night. She took Elsie's mask and wore it herself.

And now, less than a week later, Elsie lay in her coffin, never to open her eyes or speak again.

"Kneel down by her," Mrs. Schneider said. "Say a prayer for Elsie."

I wanted to run from the house and not stop until I got home, but like my friends, I knelt by the coffin.

My face was level with Elsie's porcelain hands, clasped as if in prayer. I stared at her fingers, white with a tinge of blue like snow. I knew I'd see them in my dreams for years to come.

I glanced at her face. It seemed as if her eyes were open a tiny slit. She was looking at me. No, of course she wasn't. It was a trick of the light.

Quickly I returned my gaze to her hands. It was safer to look at them than at her face. I stared at her pale fingers as if they held the secret of life and death. "Rest in peace, Elsie," I whispered. "Forgive me for being mean to you."

Slowly the five of us stood up and prepared to leave, but Mrs. Schneider stopped us with a question. "Did any of you see Elsie at the park last Wednesday? She came home in tears and told me a gang of girls called her names and chased her. They even stole her flu mask. I'd like to know who those girls are."

We shook our heads, we didn't know them, we hadn't seen them, Elsie was by herself, she was wearing her mask when we saw her.

Mr. Schneider stepped out of a corner and joined us. "I blame them girls for Elsie's death." He stared at us, his face as pale and stony as Elsie's. "If you hear anything, tell me. Their parents should know vat sort of daughters they haf."

I thought Jane was about to collapse right there and then. Her face was ashen, and her eyes brimmed with tears. She opened her mouth as if to speak, and I seized her arm, afraid of what she might say.

"Jane isn't well," I whispered to Mrs. Schneider. "We should leave before she has one of her fainting spells."

Mrs. Schneider said, "She does look poorly. You can't take chances these days."

Mr. Schneider followed us to the door. "You tell me. I vant to know the names of them girls."

“Yes, sir,” Rosie whispered. “Yes, we will.”

He nodded, and we ran down the front steps as if Elsie herself pursued us.

When we were around the corner and out of sight of Elsie’s house, we stopped to catch our breath. We hadn’t eaten a thing at the viewing, but Rosie leaned over and threw up in the gutter, heaving and heaving until nothing but green bile came up.

Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she moaned and clutched her empty belly. “Oh, my God, it’s my fault, it’s all my fault.”

Rosie began crying, something I’d never expected to see her do. We gathered around her, patting her back, stroking her hair, murmuring, but she ignored our attempts to comfort her. “Why did I tell her she’d die? Why did I take her flu mask?”

Eunice grabbed Rosie’s hand and peered into her eyes. “What’s wrong with you? It’s not your fault. It’s not anybody’s fault.” She paused to take a breath. “She was mean, and she lied and tattled on us, and none of us liked her.”

Rosie stared at Eunice. “Don’t you feel bad about what we did? Don’t you care she’s dead?”

“Well, yes, of course, I care.” Eunice backtracked, shifting her position to side with Rosie. “My goodness. I’m just saying it’s not your fault or my fault. None of us is to blame. It was a game, that’s all. We didn’t know she’d die. We didn’t make her die.”

Rosie looked at Jane and me. “What do you think? Did I kill Elsie?”

“No,” I said. “No.” I was scared now.

Tears ran down Rosie’s face, mixing with snot from her nose. “I’m going to hell when I die,” she wailed.

Jane grabbed Rosie’s arm. “You didn’t mean to hurt Elsie, so it’s not a mortal sin. Not the kind you go to hell for.”

Lucy spoke up. “I don’t believe in hell. Or the devil.”

“Everyone believes in hell,” Eunice said, “and the devil.”

Lucy shook her head. “I’m Unitarian, and we don’t believe people are burned in hell. My father says a just God wouldn’t do something that cruel.”

“Our minister says Unitarians aren’t even Christian,” Eunice said.

Just as we were building up to a religious quarrel, a door opened and a man told us to please lower our voices. His wife had flu, and we were

disturbing her rest.

After he closed the door, Rosie knuckled her tears away and sniffed. Jane took her hand and squeezed it gently. “Do you feel better now, Rosie?”

“I guess so,” she said in a low voice, “but I still wish I hadn’t taken her mask and said she’d die.”

Eunice looked at all of us. “Let’s promise never to tell anyone what happened in the park. If nobody tells, nobody will know, and we won’t get in trouble.”

Rosie spit in her palm, and we all did the same. Rubbing our hands together, we mixed our spit and swore we’d never tell.

We turned toward home. No one had anything to say. Rosie concentrated on kicking a stone down the sidewalk ahead of her. Jane huddled in her coat as if the autumn wind was as cold as winter. Eunice hummed “I Dream of Jeannie,” an old Stephen Foster song we sang in school. Lucy kicked leaves aside hoping to find a penny or a nickel. And me—I tried to banish the image of Elsie in her coffin to a dark corner of my mind where I wouldn’t have to see it.

First Rosie left us, then Eunice and Lucy. Jane and I walked on, still silent.

Finally Jane asked, “Do you think it’s our fault, Annie?”

I shook my head. “Father would say it’s a coincidence.”

Jane nodded. “That must be it. Like we told Rosie, it’s not anybody’s fault Elsie died.”

But she didn’t sound any more certain than I was. What if it was our fault, what if we were all going to hell for what we did?

We lingered on Jane’s corner as if we were afraid to part and go our separate ways. The days were short now, and darkness seemed to creep out of the earth itself. The wind had picked up, and I was cold in the thin jacket I’d put on when I left home.

“Well,” Jane said, “the streetlights are on, and my parents will be worried about me. I’d better go home.”

I watched her walk away, her head down, her footsteps muffled by the fallen leaves. She looked sad and lonely and very small under the row of tall trees bending over the road.

After she disappeared from sight, I pictured a day when I’d be older and my life would be different, and Jane and I wouldn’t be best friends

anymore. We might live far apart. I might never know her future, or she mine.

As I went on alone, I promised myself I wouldn't think about Elsie Schneider lying in her coffin. Her eyes weren't open, not even a slit. She hadn't looked at me. She hadn't, hadn't, *had not* looked at me. She couldn't have. She was dead. Dead. And she was never coming back.

But why did I glance over my shoulder? Why did I imagine I heard footsteps behind me? Why did I run the rest of the way home?

NINE

THAT NIGHT I had little appetite for supper. Mother looked at me with concern. "What's wrong, Annie? Don't you feel well?"

Truthfully, I did not feel well. My throat definitely felt scratchy. I had a tiny dry cough. And I felt hot. Flu symptoms, I was certain of it. I'd caught it from Elsie, my punishment for scaring her and making her cry.

Father's head came up, and he too looked at me. "Check her temperature, Ida," he said.

This time, Mother did not feel my forehead. She went straight to the bathroom and came back with a thermometer. "Under your tongue," she said as she slid it between my teeth. "And keep your mouth closed."

When she removed the thermometer, she squinted at the little silver line, turning the thermometer this way and that, taking so long to make out the degrees that Father snatched it out of her hand.

"Ninety-eight point six," he said. "Just right."

I didn't have the flu. Not yet.

After dinner, I picked up my old copy of *Little Women* and turned to the description of Beth's death. Picturing the possibility of my own death, I began to cry, at first quietly, then louder.

Father looked up from the evening paper in alarm. "What on earth is wrong, Annie? It's just a book. Nothing to cry over."

Mother sat on the sofa beside me and stroked my hair. "Something has upset you," she murmured. "Is it the death of the Schneider girl?"

"How did you know?"

"Her obituary is in the *Evening Sun.*"

I cuddled closer to Mother, seeking warmth and comfort. "How long are people contagious before they actually get the flu?"

Mother looked at me. "Were you around Elsie before she got sick?"

"We were in the park last week, I can't remember exactly when, and we were playing. She didn't seem sick then."

Father looked at me over the paper. “I believe the incubation period is about three days, so if you saw her a week ago, you’d already have it.”

“What if you touch something the person has, can you catch it that way?

“For example?” Father asked.

“Elsie was wearing a flu mask, and she let Rosie try it on. Lucy and Eunice tried it on, too.”

“Did you and Jane try it on?” Father asked. The concern in his voice scared me.

“No. We were afraid of it. We didn’t even touch it.”

Father and Mother exchanged worried looks. “I’m glad you didn’t put it on,” Mother said.

“Do you think Rosie and Lucy and Eunice will catch the flu?”

“I hope not,” Mother murmured, hugging me close again.

“Perhaps you shouldn’t play with them for a few days,” Father said.

“Horace, for heaven’s sake,” Mother said. “Don’t frighten Annie with talk like that. You just said the incubation period was three days.”

“*Usually* it’s three days,” Father said glumly, “but with this flu, who can be sure of anything?”

“Should I call the girls’ mothers and advise them to keep an eye on their daughters?”

“Oh, I’m sure they’ll be all right.” Father backtracked hastily, probably so as not to worry me. “They were outside in the fresh air.”

The phone rang and Mother hurried into the hall to answer it. I heard her murmuring but not clearly enough to understand what she was saying. Suppose it was Rosie’s mother calling to say Rosie had died of the flu?

When Mother hung up, I was prickling all over, terrified of what she might say.

“That was Miss Harrison,” Mother said, taking a seat beside me. “Elsie’s funeral will be at the First Lutheran Church tomorrow. She hopes all the girls in her class will attend and sit together. Do you think you can muster the courage to go?”

“Of course she can,” Father said behind his newspaper. “It’s the proper thing to do.”

“But Annie has never seen a dead person,” Mother said. “And she’s so sensitive.”

Ashamed to look at my parents, I slid deeper into the sofa. I’d probably seen more dead people than both of them. Without making much of an

effort, I began to cry again.

"Oh, Father, don't make me go," I begged. "I don't want to see Elsie. I can't bear it."

Through half-closed eyes, I saw them look at each other, obviously concerned. Mother shook her head, and Father shrugged.

"Of course you don't have to go," Mother said softly. "Unlike some parents, I've never believed children should be forced to attend funerals. Especially ones with delicate natures like you, Annie."

Feeling guilty, I went up to bed, but I lay awake a long time, thinking about Elsie's death and fearing my own. The wind blew around the house, and the windowpanes rattled as if someone were trying to get into my bedroom.

When I finally fell asleep, I dreamed that Elsie was sitting on my bed, watching me. When she leaned over me, her hair brushed my cheek and I felt the touch of her cold hand on my hand. She clasped Antoinette tightly.

"You think you're rid of me," she whispered, "but you're wrong. I'm still here, Annie." With that, she yanked off Antoinette's wig. Hundreds of worms slithered out of the hole in the doll's head.

I woke up screaming so loudly that Mother rushed into my room with Father behind her.

"What is it, Annie?" Mother cried, gathering me into her arms.

"Elsie," I cried. "Elsie was sitting on my bed, Mother, right where you're sitting now. She wasn't dead, she—" I couldn't go on.

Father patted my shoulder. "There, there, Annie. It was a dream, that's all. Try not to think about that poor girl."

Father went back to bed, but Mother sat with me awhile. "Would you like me to sing to you like I did when you were little?"

"Yes, please. Sing the lullaby about the western sea."

While I clung to her hand, she sang "Sweet and low, sweet and low, wind of the western sea."

Gradually I relaxed. With Mother beside me, I was safe. No harm could come to me. Elsie was gone. She wouldn't return. Couldn't return.

The next morning, church bells woke me up. Not funeral knells but wild ringing as if maniacs were swinging on the ropes. Frightened by the clanging of so many bells, I ran downstairs. Mother and Father grabbed my hands and laughed out loud.

“Don’t look so worried, Annie!” Father said. “They signed the Armistice! The war is over!”

Mother looked at the kitchen clock. “Officially the celebration begins this morning on the eleventh hour, of the eleventh day, of the eleventh month,” she said, “but the treaty was signed at five a.m. in France, and nobody’s waiting until it’s eleven a.m. here.”

She opened the back door, and in came the cold November air, bringing with it the din of the bells. People cheered and fireworks exploded. Mother grabbed pots and lids and handed some to Father and me.

“Come on,” she cried. “Let’s add our part to the celebration.”

We ran out into the street and joined our neighbors. Mr. Elliot from across the street was blowing a trumpet. His son, who played in the high school band, was pounding a drum and our next-door neighbor Mr. Higgins actually had a tuba. They were trying to play “Over There,” and it sounded so horrible it was wonderful.

After the cold chased everyone back into their houses, Mother made hot chocolate, and we raised our mugs and drank a toast to Mother’s brother, Paul, who’d be coming home soon. In celebration, Mother made pancakes and bacon and scrambled eggs. She even let us have slices of cake left over from dinner last night. By the time I finished eating, I thought my stomach would burst wide open.

It wasn’t until I walked over to Jane’s house that I realized I hadn’t thought about Elsie once. Jane saw me coming and ran to meet me. “Let’s go to Prospect Street and watch the parade,” she cried.

Forgetting Elsie again, I ran with Jane toward the sounds of a real marching band playing the National Anthem. Mobs of happy people followed the band, singing and yelling and waving flags. Rosie caught up with us. She had her brother’s police whistle and we took turns blowing it. Lucy and Eunice found us in the crowd, and we let ourselves be carried along, giddy with excitement.

The band turned a corner. They were playing “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” and people were dancing in the street.

We passed the First Lutheran Church just as the pallbearers brought a coffin down the steps—a coffin too small for an adult. Mr. and Mrs. Schneider followed it, walking slowly, their heads down, their faces pale against their black clothing. Miss Harrison came close behind them, leading

a group of our classmates. When she saw us in the crowd of revelers, she frowned.

The parade came to a halt, of course. The band stopped playing and bowed their heads. Men removed their hats and put their hands on their hearts. Women stood silently, their faces full of grief for their own losses.

Paralyzed with shock at the sight of Elsie's coffin, all four of us stood there in plain view. Mr. and Mrs. Schneider both saw us. For a moment I was afraid they were going to cross the street and confront us, but they shook their heads and climbed into the carriage behind the hearse.

Even after the funeral procession had vanished, the crowd spoke in low voices. The band marched away silently and didn't play until they were out of sight.

"Let's get out of here," Rosie said, but we weren't fast enough to escape Miss Harrison.

"I'm shocked to see you celebrating instead of attending Elsie's funeral." She looked at us in a way that made us all feel like monsters without consciences. "I truly thought better of you."

Her eyes moved from one of us to another. "I talked to your parents last night. I told them the time and the date. Everyone, except Annie's mother, said you'd be at the church with your classmates. Yet here you are, rowdy and rude, behaving like hoydens as if I'd never taught you proper etiquette. You have deeply disappointed me."

With that, she turned away, head up, back stiff, and joined the well-behaved girls waiting for her.

"Teacher's pets," Eunice muttered.

Nobody else had anything to say. We'd lost our enthusiasm for the parade. What was there to do but go home?

TEN

DURING THE MONTHS after Elsie's death, funeral knells still rang, but not five or six times a day as they had earlier. We didn't see as many hearses in the streets or funeral wreaths on doors. In December, school reopened and the four of us worked hard to win back Miss Harrison's approval. Besides Elsie, two girls at Pearce died of the flu, but they weren't in our class, and we didn't know them.

Uncle Paul came home for Christmas, but he shared no war stories with us. He was pale and thin and walked with a limp. He looked older, too. And he seemed uncertain about things. Even though he'd survived the war, Mother continued to worry about him.

A few days after Christmas, Uncle Paul caught a train to Ohio to live with my grandparents.

We stood on the platform waving until the train was out of sight. As we returned to the car, Mother took Father's arm. "He's not himself," she murmured.

"Perhaps with the passage of time," Father began, but dropped his voice so low I couldn't hear what he said next.

I dawdled behind them, knowing they didn't want me to overhear their worries. I'd seen the change for myself.

In January, the snow began. We went sledding every day after school and all day on weekends. High Street was our favorite. The hill was so steep you felt as if you were flying, but you had to be careful not to crash into the stone wall at the bottom.

A boy named Henry had been killed there last year. He fractured his skull and died instantly. Some kids claimed Henry's ghost haunted the place where he'd died. They said his ghost tried to make kids crash into the wall, but they just wanted to scare us.

A group of older kids kept a bonfire going at the top, and parents often provided marshmallows and hot chocolate. Best of all, our parents allowed

us to stay out after dark as long as we were home by eight. We felt grown-up and daring and ready for adventures.

One night Rosie asked, “Are you getting tired of High Street?”

“Do you know a better place?” Lucy asked.

“Follow me!” Rosie grabbed her sled, did a perfect belly flop, and sped down the hill.

We flew behind her, our sled runners bouncing over the ruts made by other sleds, a cold wind in our faces, swerving around the corner at the bottom of the hill, and coming to a slow stop on Prospect Street.

“Where are we going?” Eunice asked.

Rosie smiled. “You’ll see.”

We turned onto Railroad Avenue, which ran downhill and crossed the train tracks. Ahead of us was the flour mill and the little shanties built for the people who worked there. Behind curtained windows, lamps shone, casting rectangles of light on the snow. Some were vacant, their windows and doors boarded up, snow heaped high around them.

“Where are we going?” Eunice asked again.

Without answering, Rosie turned the corner on Hilton Avenue and hopped on her sled to coast downhill. The rest of us followed her.

At the bottom, Rosie stopped. “Here we are,” she cried. “The steepest hills in Mount Pleasant!”

With a big grin, she pointed to a massive iron gate decorated with metal leaves and fanciful vines. On it was a sign:

FOREST HEIGHTS CEMETERY
HOURS: EIGHT A.M. TO SUNSET

Of all the places Rosie might have chosen, I hadn’t expected the cemetery. It was almost as old as the town itself, which meant the burials went back to the 1700s, and it was built on acres and acres of steep hills. A fence surrounded it, its bars tall and straight, their tops pointed like ancient weapons. *To keep the living out or the dead in?* I wondered.

The moon lit the graves as bright as day, rows and rows of them climbing the hillsides, everything from stone markers for the poor to columns and statues and rows of mausoleums for the rich. So many dead people, more of them than the entire living population of Mount Pleasant, especially now that the flu had taken its terrible toll.

It was the loneliest sight imaginable, a perfect setting for an Edgar Allan Poe story. Jane reached for my hand. We drew close together.

Trying to sound braver than I was, I said, "It's just a cemetery, Jane." *Just* a cemetery—those tombstones gave me the shivers, but I told myself it was the wind that made me shiver, not the cemetery.

"How are we supposed to get in?" Eunice pointed at a padlock as big as her hand, fastened to the gate with thick chains.

"My brother told me about a place where the bars are bent apart."

Dragging our sleds behind us, we floundered through deep snow. The farther we walked, the more I hoped someone had mended the gap.

Suddenly Rosie stopped. "Here it is, right where Mike said."

The four of us helped her dig away some of the snow. Rosie squeezed through the gap first and maneuvered her sled into the cemetery. Although I had a bad feeling about the cemetery and its occupants, I wasn't about to say I was terrified and run home.

We all followed Rosie through the gap, even Jane, pulling our sleds in after us. Ahead was a steep hill. Tall, thin tombstones climbed upward. At the top was a row of mausoleums, those scary little houses for the dead.

The wind whispered to itself among clumps of firs and cypresses and rattled the branches of tall oak trees. A freight train blew a long warning blast for the Railroad Avenue crossing. Overhead, the moon gazed down at us with its usual sad look.

Talking loudly, Rosie led the way toward the top, stopping now and then to read a tombstone.

"Here lies Uriah Short," she said. "His life was cut short."

"It doesn't say that!" Lucy pushed her aside to see for herself. "Asleep in the Savior's arms," she corrected Rosie. "That's what it says."

Rosie laughed. "It was a short sleep, though."

Eunice laughed loud enough for all of us.

At the top of the highest hill, we belly flopped on our sleds and shot down, swerving around tombstones and trees. The moon cast inky, sharp-edged shadows. My sled bounced over the snow's icy crust, bucking beneath me like a wild horse. Wind slapped my face with biting cold and snatched my breath away. At any moment I might take to the air and fly over Mount Pleasant as if I rode a magic carpet.

Rosie was the first to coast to a stop at the bottom of the hill. She jumped up from her sled and shouted her joy at the moon.

“Admit it,” she cried, “this is the best sledding place in Mount Pleasant, and I found it!”

“Hooray for you,” Eunice shouted.

“For she’s a jolly good fellow,” sang Lucy, “for she’s a jolly good fellow, for she’s a jolly good fellow, which nobody can deny!”

We all sang another chorus so loudly our voices echoed back from the row of mausoleums above us.

All of us, that is, except Jane. She stood a little apart, brushing snow from her mittens and frowning. “Don’t make so much noise,” she said.

“Why? “Lucy asked. “Are you scared we’ll wake the dead?”

We all laughed except Jane, who said in a low voice, “It’s disrespectful.”

“Oh, don’t be such a scaredy-cat,” Eunice said.

Turning her back on Jane, she dragged her sled up the hill behind Lucy and Rosie. I hurried after them. Jane lingered behind, and I waited for her to catch up.

The tombstones on this side of the hill were newer. And plainer. And closer together. Rosie began reading names and dates. The birth dates varied, but the death years were all the same—1918, 1918, 1918. We were in the part of the cemetery where the flu victims were buried. They stretched out in all directions, uphill, downhill, and sideways.

We stopped in front of a grave guarded by a small angel. A bouquet of roses frozen black and stiff lay in the snow. The wind blew, and the stems stirred. Their thorns made a faint scritch-scratching sound.

Rosie leaned closer to read the epitaph.

AGNES O’NEIL
BELOVED DAUGHTER OF
EDWARD AND HELEN O’NEIL
BORN SEPTEMBER 3, 1900
DIED OCTOBER 5, 1918
AT REST IN THE ARMS OF THE LORD.

The name was familiar, but I didn’t know why until Jane took my arm and whispered, “It’s the girl from our first viewing—remember? The one who sang in the choir.”

I pictured Agnes as she’d been that day, a pretty girl lying in her coffin, her long hair fanned out on a satin pillow under her head. Now she lay at

our feet beneath six feet of earth and four feet of icy hard snow, her eyes closed, waiting to rise from the dead. For a moment, I wondered what she looked like now, but quickly chased the image of a skull from my mind. Mustn't think such things. Bad dreams.

Suddenly fearful, Jane and I backed away, but Rosie ran a mittened hand over the inscription. "Poor Agnes," she said. "It must be dreadful to lie here all alone in the cold."

"Don't speak of it," Eunice whispered. "You're scaring me."

"We came here to sled ride," Lucy said, "not to talk about the dead."

Jane and I followed them up the hill. "Do you think this is where Elsie is buried?" she whispered.

A cold feeling slid up and down my spine. Grabbing Jane's hand, I ran after the others. "Come on, Jane, let's not lag behind."

Out of breath from climbing through knee-deep snow, we rested at the top for a moment. Below us were the lights of the town. I tried to find my house, but it was hard to pick it out. One roof looked much the same as any other. We found our school and the public schools, the churches, the park, and City Hall. We even glimpsed the river, frozen over now, like a wide white highway to the sea.

"Is everybody ready?" Rosie stood with her sled pressed to her chest, all set to get a flying start.

Down we went again, riding the ruts our runners had left the first time. We went faster and faster. My forehead ached with cold, and spray from the sled's runners hit my face. It was bouncier too. Lucy almost hit a tombstone but swerved just in time to topple off her sled into the snow. She lay there laughing, then spread her arms and legs to make an angel.

After three or four, maybe five runs down the hill, Rosie said, "I've got an idea. Let's hook our sleds together and go down in a train."

Rosie was first, of course. Lucy was second, then Eunice, then Jane, and I was last of all, the caboose, the best position to whip back and forth behind the others. Rosie gave the command, and we pushed off, picking up speed as we raced down the hill.

I slid from one side to the other, almost colliding with Rosie more than once. Halfway down, my sled broke away from the others, and I found myself hurtling downhill sideways with no control over speed or direction. My wild ride ended with a jolt that sent me flying through the air. I hit something and everything went black.

When I opened my eyes, I was sprawled on my face, at the feet of an angel. For a moment, I thought I was dead and the angel had brought me to heaven, a cold, snowy place filled with pain, but then Jane's voice broke through the darkness.

"Annie, Annie, are you all right?" The other girls had gathered around me. It made me dizzy to look at them. Their voices hurt my ears, and my head rang with noise that made it hard to hard to understand what they were saying.

I didn't know if I was all right or about to die. My head hurt so fiercely I thought it must be broken like Jack's in the nursery rhyme. I was afraid to move in case I couldn't.

"You were knocked clean out," Rosie said. "You hit that angel, and bam!"

"It's a mercy you weren't killed," Jane whispered.

"Look at me," Lucy said. She held up her hand. "How many fingers can you see?"

I squinted hard, but my head was still spinning, and I could barely see her hand, let alone her fingers.

"What's your name?"

"You know my name."

"Say it anyway."

I said my name and told her my age and where I lived, but I simply could not count those fingers. Or tell her who was president.

"We need to take her to my house," Lucy said. "Look at all the blood she's lost. And she might have a concussion. You can die hours after it happens."

Everyone looked at my blood, including me. It had run across the snow and puddled in a hole it melted. Some of it was red, and some was pink from the melted snow, but it seemed like a huge amount to have come out of me. In fact, I thought I might faint just seeing it there. I touched my face, and my mitten came away red. No wonder I couldn't see Lucy's fingers. I had blood in my eyes.

"We'll get in so much trouble if we take Annie to your house," Eunice said.

"No, we won't," Rosie said. "We'll tell Dr. Hughes Annie hit the stone wall at the bottom of High Street. We'll never ever say anything to anyone about the cemetery."

“Like when we had the fight with Elsie?” Eunice asked. “And we made a solemn oath not to tell?”

“Yes, exactly like that.”

“Do we have to spit on our hands?” Lucy asked.

“Not this time,” Rosie said. “Just swear to say nothing. It’s too cold to take our mittens off.”

My head ached and throbbed and pounded, but with Jane’s help, I managed to stand up. I saw two of everyone. They multiplied into triplets, quintuplets, as distorted as reflections in fun house mirrors. Then the snow and the tombstones began to spin faster and faster. I grabbed Jane’s arm, and she stopped me from falling,

“Can you walk?” Jane asked.

“I think so.” But after I took a step, I sat down. Lucy muttered something I couldn’t understand. “What did you say?” I asked her.

“Me?” Lucy shook her head. “I didn’t say anything.”

“Well, somebody’s mumbling.” I looked around. “Can’t you hear it? It’s really loud. It’s making my ears buzz.”

They stood there staring at me. None of them would admit to saying a word or hearing anything.

“You must have a concussion,” Lucy said. “Help me get her on a sled, Rosie. She needs to see my father. And soon!”

Since my sled was damaged, Rosie and Jane made me lie on Rosie’s. It belonged to her brother Mike and was longer than anyone else’s. I didn’t argue. I was too dizzy to walk, everything was still blurry, and my head echoed with mumbles and mutters that sounded like someone talking in foreign languages. I was scared my brain was ruined and I’d be dead by morning. In a few days, I’d be sleeping here in the cemetery.

Rosie and Jane pulled me slowly through the snow, trying not to bounce me around too much or bump any tombstones. I heard Eunice say she was glad we were going home. She was cold, and she really didn’t like the cemetery very much. Lucy said she’d been having a swell time and wished I hadn’t ruined all the fun by crashing into that stupid angel.

All the while, the voice only I heard mumbled and muttered and shrieked until I thought I’d lose my mind.

ELEVEN

IT WAS A LONG, cold sled ride to Lucy's house. Every bump hurt, but as we left the cemetery behind, the awful mumbling and muttering voices slowly faded away, and I began to feel better. Still weak, still dizzy when I lifted my head, but I believed I might live after all.

Lucy ran up her porch steps and called her father to come outside and carry me into the house. Dr. Hughes took one look at my bloody head and carried me through the warm house, straight to his office. Laying me on an examining table, he cleaned away the blood and examined the cut.

"It's not a fatal wound," he said with a smile, "but you'll need a few stitches. Even superficial scalp cuts bleed excessively, and this one is fairly deep."

He paused and shone a little light in my eyes. "I'm concerned about the possibility of a concussion. Can you tell me exactly what happened?"

I said I wasn't sure, so Rosie explained. "We were sled riding on High Street," she said, "and Annie crashed into the stone wall at the bottom where Henry got killed last year. She knocked herself out, and she was bleeding all over the snow, and we thought she was dead like Henry, and we were so scared—"

I don't know how long Rosie would have gone on embellishing the story if Lucy hadn't interrupted.

"She knew her name, but she couldn't count my fingers and she said she heard voices in her head," Lucy told her father. "She was so dizzy she couldn't sit up at first, she just lay in the snow. When she did get up, she couldn't walk straight."

Dr. Hughes held his hand up in front of my face and peered into my eyes. "How many fingers do you see?"

His hand was blurry, a blob. I couldn't focus on it. Unsure, I hesitated and squinted. "Four?" I guessed.

He shook his head. "Try again." I failed once more, twice more.

"It's a concussion all right," he said. "Blurred vision is a symptom."

He looked at me closely. “Are you dizzy?”

I nodded and my head throbbed with pain.

“Nausea?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“How about your ears? Any ringing or buzzing?”

I whispered yes again.

By now I was expecting to be sent to the hospital. My head hurt so bad I could scarcely hold it up. My stomach threatened to empty itself right there and then on Dr. Hughes’s shoes. I struggled not to cry.

Dr. Hughes patted my shoulder. “You’ll need to rest for a few days. By next week, you’ll feel fine.”

Turning toward the door, he said, “I’m going to call your parents now and ask their permission to stitch you up. I’m sure they’ll be here any moment.”

To Jane, Rosie, and Eunice he said, “As soon as I have Annie sorted, I’ll drive you girls home.”

After Dr. Hughes left, Eunice gave me a pitying look. “Oooh, stitches,” she said, “I had my chin sewn up when I was little, and it really hurt. I still have the scar. See?”

She pointed at a faint white line I’d never even noticed and winced.

Lucy frowned at Eunice. “You can make a bet my father didn’t do that.” To me she said, “Don’t worry, Annie, my father won’t hurt you, and you won’t have a scar. People say he’s the best stitcher in Mount Pleasant.”

Dr. Hughes returned and told Lucy and the others to leave the room. Before I knew it, he had my cut stitched up and my head bandaged.

Like Lucy said, it hadn’t hurt much at all—just prick, prick, and he was done. The worst part was when he shaved a circle on my scalp about the size of a silver dollar. He said my hair would grow back in no time and no one would be the wiser. I hoped he was right, but I was certain I’d have a permanent bald spot. People would point and laugh. The boys would call me Baldy.

Mother and Father arrived just as Dr. Hughes was finishing up. You never saw such a scene, Mother fussing over me and Father asking how it happened until I felt so dizzy I almost fainted. That silenced them.

“Annie needs to rest,” Dr. Hughes told them. “Put her to bed, cover her with warm blankets, and sit beside her. She has a concussion and needs watching all night.”

Mother was all aflutter again. Father seemed torn between comforting her and comforting me and tried to do both, turning to her and then me and then back to her.

"Keep Annie in bed for a few days," Dr. Hughes said. "Check on her frequently. I'll visit tomorrow afternoon about four, if that's convenient."

While the doctor gave Mother more instructions, Father wrapped me up in the blanket he'd brought and carried me to the car.

As he settled me in the back seat, he asked again how it had happened.

"Father, please," I whispered, "I don't remember much, and I'm tired and I want to go home."

"Yes, yes, of course, Annie." He went to fetch Mother, and soon the three of us were driving through the snowy streets. Feeling as if I were sinking down, down, down into snow, deep snow, cold snow, I fell into a troubled sleep. Suddenly I was in the cemetery again, flying through the air, crashing into the angel, only she was made of snow and she broke into pieces when I hit her. And a girl as white as snow stood where the angel had been, and she was wearing a flu mask.

Even though the mask hid her face, I knew who she was, but I couldn't remember her name. She took my hand and held it in hers, a grip as hard and cold as ice. It felt as if our hands had frozen together. I'd never escape, she'd never let me go. And then she pulled me down into the snow, deeper and deeper, and I saw a door, tall and black, and knew she meant to leave me there—at death's door.

Cold air hit my face, and I woke with a cry. The car door was open. Father leaned over me. "Wake up, Annie. We're home."

As he lifted me, I wrapped my arms tightly around his neck, feeling the warmth of his body through his heavy wool coat. Like a child, I pressed my face against his shoulder.

"Were you dreaming?" Mother asked. "You sounded scared."

Without raising my head, I whispered "Yes," but I didn't tell her what had frightened me.

Father carried me up to bed. My lamp glowed with a soft warm light, illuminating a shelf of books, the toys above them, the dollhouse in the corner, the rocking chair, the roses on the wallpaper, the lacy curtains shutting out the night. Never had my room looked so comforting, so safe. My old bear lay on my pillow, waiting to comfort me.

Mother undressed me and helped me into a warm flannel nightgown. Then she covered me with so many blankets I thought I might suffocate. She tucked the bear under the covers and I hugged him.

"Father and I will take turns sitting with you tonight," Mother said. "If you need anything, just tell us."

Even though I was exhausted, I slept badly, waking from dreams of the cemetery and the snow angel. The masked girl dragged me down to the black door over and over again, but I always woke up before it opened. If I stayed asleep, I knew the door would open and I would die.

At last the long night passed. Mother brought me breakfast on a tray—a soft-boiled egg in a little yellow cup shaped like a baby chick, toast, and weak tea. She'd cut the toast into little strips we called soldiers. I dipped them into my egg just as I had when I was little.

"How does your head feel?" she asked.

"It hurts," I said.

She went downstairs and returned with a spoonful of aspirin she'd mashed into grape jelly to hide its bitter taste.

Father came in to give me a hug and then left for work. I heard the car engine start with a sputter then a *putt-putt-putt*ing as he drove away.

Mother sat in the rocker, dividing her time between knitting and reading to me. She'd finished the blue sweater and was working on a beret to go with it. The click of the needles was relaxing, and the sound of her voice comforted me. I'd never read *The Swiss Family Robinson.* The story of a family marooned on an island took my mind off my bad dreams and stilled the mumble and mutter of voices in my aching head.

Dr. Hughes looked in on me as he'd promised. He pronounced me in good health and coming along as well as could be expected. Since my head still ached fiercely and I was dizzy, forgetful, and weak, he told Mother to keep me in bed for at least a few more days, maybe longer.

That night I slept better, waking only twice from the dream. In the afternoon Jane came to see me. We played a few games of old maid and a round of checkers, but I couldn't keep my mind on my kings, so we put the board aside.

She told me another classmate, Hester Grimes, had come down with the flu but was already on the mend.

"No one has died in Baltimore for three whole days," Jane said. "I read it in the paper."

“That’s good. I hope it’s soon gone forever.”

We talked for a while about school. The girls had begun rehearsing for the spring program, and Miss Harrison had chosen Jane to recite Longfellow’s poem “The Wreck of the Hesperus.”

“It’s very sad,” she said.

“It’s also very long,” I said.

“Well, Miss Harrison said I needn’t memorize the whole poem. She wants me to tell what it’s about and recite what she calls ‘selected stanzas.’”

“In other words, just the saddest parts.”

“Yes, the ones about the captain’s little daughter and the shipwreck and how she freezes to death in the ocean and a fisherman finds her lashed to the mast. I already know the end by heart.” Jane cleared her throat and recited:

The salt sea was frozen on her breast,
The salt tears in her eyes;
And he saw her hair, like the brown sea-weed,
On the billows fall and rise.

Such was the wreck of the Hesperus,
In the midnight and the snow!
Christ save us all from a death like this,
On the reef of Norman’s Woe!

Jane had a perfect face for the poem, sorrowful and pale, and she got teary eyed as she spoke.

“I hope I don’t cry at the recital,” Jane said. “But it’s just so sad, especially after the flu and the people we know who died, not at sea of course, but right here in Mount Pleasant. The man and woman across my street; Arthur Livingston, the boy on my corner; and I don’t know how many others.” She paused. “Oh, and poor Elsie. I’ll feel bad about her my whole life.”

An image of the masked girl in the snowy cemetery arose in my mind, and I closed my eyes for a moment. I longed to tell Jane about my dream. Maybe she’d understand what it meant. But talking about it might make it stronger.

Jane looked at me as if she were worried about me. “Miss Harrison wants to know if I should bring your assignments so you can keep up with the class.”

“Not yet.” I slid down in bed. “It hurts my head my head to think. And I get so tired. All I want to do is sleep.”

Jane stood up. “Oh dear, Annie, you need to rest, and here I am keeping you awake with idle chatter.”

“Can you come back tomorrow?”

“Yes, of course. Should I bring Rosie or—”

“No, not yet. Just you.” Truthfully, I didn’t have enough energy to cope with Rosie, who’d no doubt bounce on the bed and tell jokes and talk too loud.

At the end of seven long days, Dr. Hughes came to remove the stitches in my head. After checking me over, he told Mother I needed to build up my strength. He recommended fresh air and limited exercise. A good walk, for instance, would do me a world of good.

When Mother asked about school, he suggested waiting until next week. “Let’s get Annie back on her feet and worry about school later.”

That was fine with me. I was in no hurry to sit in a desk all day and listen to Miss Harrison. I tired easily, my mind still drifted, my head still hurt (though not nearly as badly), and the voices still muttered.

After I’d been up and about for a few days, Mother asked if I’d be all right on my own. “It’s bridge day at the women’s club,” she said, “and Irene Hughes is begging me to come. Last week she had a terrible partner and did very poorly.” Mother stroked my forehead. “Irene says Lucy misses you and hopes you feel better soon.”

“I’ll be fine by myself,” I told her. “I’ll spend the afternoon reading the mystery you brought home from the library.”

Mother smiled and ran upstairs to powder her nose, as she put it, and I curled up on the sofa with *The Moonstone*. Jane told me it was too scary for her, but, scary or not, I knew I’d like it. I’d read *The Woman in White* and loved it—*The Moonstone* couldn’t be any scarier than that.

After Mother left, the house was very quiet. The *tick-tock-tick* of the clock on the mantel was the loudest sound. That and the occasional scratching and tapping of branches at the window.

I’d no sooner begun reading than I found myself thinking about my dream. Last night it had been so vivid. As usual, I lay at the angel’s feet,

bleeding in the snow. The girl with the mask emerged and stood above me. As she dragged me down into the dark, I almost recognized her. I awoke with her name on my lips, but it slipped away and I shivered with fear.

Suddenly I felt an irresistible urge to return to the cemetery. Maybe if I saw the angel again, I could banish it from my dreams. Tossing off the afghan, I pulled on the blue sweater Mother had knitted for me and bundled up in my coat, snow pants, scarf, hat, and mittens. I looked as round as a snowman, but even though it was the beginning of February, the weather was still cold. We'd had snow the day before, and it lay atop the dirty old snow in a fresh white coat, as if someone had painted it there to hide the ugliness beneath.

It was a long walk. By the time I came to the shanties where the millworkers lived, I was cold and tired. My head throbbed, and I wondered if I'd overdone the limited exercise Dr. Hughes had prescribed for me.

This time the gates were open. A horse-drawn hearse passed me, followed by a line of black carriages. As the funeral procession slowly disappeared into the depths of the cemetery, I crossed my fingers inside my mittens, a habit I'd gotten into whenever I saw a hearse—a sort of protection against the flu. So far it had worked.

I considered walking up the plowed driveway, much easier than wading through deep snow, but I wasn't sure I'd find the angel without following the exact route we'd taken that night.

I trudged along the fence until I found the gap. Wiggling through, I looked for the tracks we'd made, but new snow covered them. I should have given up then and turned back, but instead I began climbing the hill. It was steeper than I remembered, and I rested for a while at the top.

Seven crows flew out of a nearby grove of oak trees and passed in a ragged black line over my head. I thought of the old counting rhyme which began *one crow for sorrow,* but what did seven crows mean? I'd forgotten.

Slowly and carefully, I made my way downhill. My boots filled with snow, and my cold toes tingled with pain. My head throbbed, and my skull echoed with mumbling muttering sounds. The bright sun on the white snow blinded me. Unable to see properly, I fell and slid to the bottom, landing at the feet of a stone angel.

Near me, a splintered bit of my sled poked up through the snow. I'd come to the right place.

But the noise in my head was so loud and hurt so much that I lay where I'd fallen and looked up at the angel. She was smaller than I remembered, no bigger than a doll, but she had a mean expression, not what you'd expect on an angel's face at all. From her outstretched finger, a flu mask dangled, twisting in the wind.

Frightened by the mask, I squinted at the inscription beneath the angel's stone-cold toes. The words were blurred by a frosting of frozen snow. Carefully I brushed it aside and read

HERE LIES ELSIE SCHNEIDER
BELOVED DAUGHTER OF
HILDA AND KARL SCHNEIDER
BORN 15 MARCH 1906
DIED 8 NOVEMBER 1918
IN HER TWELFTH YEAR

In a panic of fear and guilt, I scrambled to my feet and backed away, slipping and sliding on the icy snow, breaking through the crust and sinking deeper with every effort I made to run. Of all the graves in the cemetery, I'd crashed into Elsie's.

TWELVE

AS I STRUGGLED IN THE SNOW, the voices in my head became one voice, and it was speaking words in a language I understood.

"Hello, Annie Browne," the voice said. "At last you've come."

Elsie floated above the snow. She was deathly pale and not quite solid. Her lusterless blond hair blew around her face, and she wore the same pale blue silk dress and matching bow she'd worn when I last saw her lying in her coffin, apparently as dead as dead can be.

"Why don't you say hello?" she asked. "Surely you haven't forgotten me already."

She drifted closer. Her bare feet grazed the snow's surface but left no tracks. I wanted to turn my head away, but I couldn't help looking at her. I saw her crooked teeth, longer and more yellow than I remembered. Her skin was stretched tight over her skull, and her eyes gleamed in their sockets. She looked as if she wanted to take my life and make it hers.

Elsie laughed. "Well, I do declare," she said. "You're afraid of me. I wonder why? Could it be you think I want to get even with you?"

Desperately I looked for someone to rescue me, but the only living creature in sight was a crow, hunched on a nearby stone cross and watching me.

"One crow for sorrow," Elsie whispered in a voice as harsh as the wind on a winter night. "*Your* sorrow."

I finally found my voice. "You're not real, you can't be, you're dead, I saw you in your coffin. I saw them take you away in a hearse. They *buried* you." I pointed at her grave. "Right there—can't you see your name written at the angel's feet?"

Elsie ran one finger over the inscription. "I'd still be sleeping if you hadn't waked me up crashing into my grave. You disturbed some of the others as well. You must have heard us complaining."

"I didn't know, Elsie, I couldn't understand the voices, I thought it was just noise in my head." *This can't be true,* I thought. *I must be dreaming. I'll*

open my eyes and find myself at home on the sofa.

Elsie flashed her terrible teeth in a smile. “But you understand me now, don’t you?”

“What do you want from me?”

“You know what I want.”

“No, I don’t, I swear I don’t.” I hid my face behind my hands to keep from looking into her eyes.

“Now that I’m dead, I mean to have the friend I wanted when I was alive—*you*, Annie.”

“How can we be friends? You’re, you’re—”

As I fumbled for the right words, Elsie shrugged. “Oh, yes, you’re right. I’m dead. Well, la tee dah, we can’t let a little thing like that come between us, can we?”

“I didn’t want to be your friend when you were alive, and I don’t want to be your friend now.” I stared at Elsie. “I have plenty of friends already!”

“Not for long,” Elsie said. “Soon everyone will hate you even more than they hated me.”

“My friends won’t turn against me. Not ever!”

“Just wait,” Elsie said. “You’ll see.”

A gang of crows settled themselves noisily in a tall oak. Elsie turned away to count them. “Seven,” she said. “Do you know what seven crows mean?”

When I shook my head, she said, *“Seven crows for a secret, never to be told.* That’s what our friendship will be—a secret never to be told.” She laughed. “Even if you tell, no one will believe you.”

The sun was low in the sky now, and the tombstone’s blue shadows were long and menacing. The wind blew harder, and I thought I might freeze to death in the cemetery.

“Please let me go home, Elsie,” I begged.

“First you have to promise something.” Plucking the flu mask from the angel’s stone finger, she thrust it at me. “I think Rosie should have this, don’t you?”

“No.” I put my hands behind my back. “Get that thing away from me. I won’t touch it!”

Elsie blew her cold breath in my face. “You always do what Rosie says. Now you must do what *I* say.”

“What if I don’t?”

“Do you want to go home?” She held out the mask. “Or do you want to stay here and freeze to death?”

With revulsion, I took it from her. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

“When you go back to school, put the mask in Rosie’s bookbag. Don’t let anyone see you.” She paused to be sure I was listening. “All the things we do will be secrets. I’ll know if you tell.”

With that, Elsie faded away, and I was alone with the seven crows. They sat on a branch with their heads turned toward me. How long and sharp their beaks were, how beady their eyes. How wicked they looked.

Stuffing the mask into my pocket, I pulled free of the snow’s grip. My legs and feet were numb with cold and weak with fear. Without giving my sled a thought, I stumbled downhill to the fence and squeezed through the gap in the railings. Behind me the crows cawed. Their voices sounded like laughter.

As I hurried past the shabby little houses on Railroad Avenue, I told myself Elsie had been a hallucination brought on by my concussion. I wasn’t over it yet—it must be worse than Dr. Hughes thought.

But how was I to explain the flu mask in my pocket? I pulled it out and looked at it. Dingy and tattered, it was disgusting. I wanted to throw it away, but Elsie’s voice rang in my head. She’d know if I didn’t put it in Rosie’s bookbag. *She’d know.*

But why did she want me to put it there? Would Rosie get the flu? Was that Elsie’s intention?

I wadded the mask up and threw it into a pile of snow left by the plow. Before I’d taken more than ten steps, I turned around and went back for it. She’d know, she’d know, I knew she’d know. And she’d make something horrible happen.

By the time I reached my house, I was gasping for breath. Elsie’s words spun in my brain as sharp as knives and just as painful—*best friends forever, you and me, me and you, no one else, you and me, me and you, best friends . . .*

No, no, no—it couldn’t be, mustn’t be. There had to be a way to escape from Elsie. But how? She might be following me at this very moment, cloaked in darkness, invisible but always there, just behind me. I looked back, fearing I’d see her, but the sidewalk was empty.

I opened the front door and ran inside, straight into Mother’s arms. “Where have you been?” she cried. “It’s almost dark.”

She drew back and studied my face. “Look at you, you’re as white as a ghost. What’s wrong? What’s happened?”

“Oh, Mother, Mother,” I sobbed, “please don’t be upset. I’m sorry I’m late. I was at the library, and I lost track of the time. I ran all the way home.”

“You must be exhausted,” Mother said. “Let me help you with your boots and snow pants. Then you can change your clothes and rest by the fire. I’ll bring you a nice hot cup of tea.”

Soon I was lying on the couch covered with one of Mother’s hand-knit afghans. The tea was hot and the fire warm. My cold feet and hands gradually thawed.

“You’ve overexerted yourself.” Mother looked worried. “Dr. Hughes said moderate exercise, not a ten-block walk to the library.”

I finished my tea and set the cup and saucer on a low table beside the couch. The firelight shone through the fragile porcelain. Just as I began to relax, I sensed a movement in the dark corner behind Father’s chair. I waited for it to move again. Had Elsie followed me home and slipped through the door behind me?

The shadows moved again. When I leaned forward to see better, Mother looked at me. “Why are you staring into the corner, Annie? Is something there?”

“No, no, of course not.” I leaned back against a sofa pillow and forced myself to gaze into the fire. I wouldn’t look in the corner. I wouldn’t. And I would not, would not, would not put the flu mask in Rosie’s bookbag. Elsie wasn’t real, she was a hallucination, and so was the mask. If I looked in my coat pocket, it wouldn’t be there.

“You seem worried,” Mother said. “Does your head hurt?”

“No, my head’s fine, but I was wondering about something. May I ask you a silly question?”

“You may ask anything you want.”

I hesitated a moment, afraid of what Mother might say. “Do you believe in ghosts?”

“Ghosts?” She looked startled. “Good heavens, no. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, I was reading a book about ghosts at the library—true stories that really happened to people.”

“True? I doubt that very much.”

“Well,” I said slowly, “one of the stories was about a girl who died, and her ghost came back to haunt a girl who’d been mean to her when the ghost was alive. The ghost said she was the girl’s best friend and the girl had to do everything she told her to do, no matter how bad it was. And the girl had to keep it secret.”

“No wonder you’re upset. That sounds very scary.” Mother finished the row she was knitting and looked at me. “What happened to the girl?”

“The library closed, and I didn’t have time to finish reading the story.”

Mother smiled and resumed knitting. “Don’t worry, Annie. The person who told that story made it up. In real life, things like that don’t happen.”

Oh, Mother, Mother, I wish I could tell you how wrong you are.

THIRTEEN

MONDAY MORNING came long before I was ready for it. I dressed in my uniform, and Mother helped me tie my hair ribbon.

"You look so pretty," she told me. "Everyone in your class will be very happy to see you."

I gazed into the mirror and pointed to the bald spot, smaller now but still visible, as was the jagged red line of the scar running through it. "What about this?"

Mother smiled. "Think of it as your red badge of courage," she said. "All the girls will want to hear about your accident."

Just as I finished my oatmeal, Jane knocked at the door.

When I ran to meet her, she gave me a big hug. "Oh, I'm so glad you're well enough to come to school, Annie. I've missed you so much."

"I've missed you, too."

As Jane walked beside me chattering about the spring program, I felt stiff and uncomfortable and found little to say. My bookbag's strap weighed heavily on my shoulder, and all I thought about was the mask hidden at the bottom.

As we climbed the school steps, I saw Elsie sitting on a ledge above the door. She swung her bare feet and waved at me. "Don't forget to do what I told you—I'll know if you don't do it."

She vanished as quickly as she'd appeared, but after Jane and I went inside, Elsie joined us, so close I felt the cold of her body through my coat.

"Best friends, best friends," she whispered in my ear.

"Go away, I'm not your friend!" I shouted. "Leave me alone!"

Jane turned to me in alarm. "What do you mean, Annie? Of course you're my friend. Why did you say that?"

"I wasn't talking to you," I said, but my voice was wrong. I meant to sound sorry, but I sounded mad instead.

"But there's no one here but me," Jane said.

Elsie blew cold air in her face and laughed when Jane shivered.

“You gave me a headache talking and talking and talking about ‘The Wreck of the Hesperus,’” I said. “It’s a boring poem, and I’m sick of it.”

I stared at Jane, horrified at myself. Why had I said such a dreadful thing? It was as if the words had tumbled out of my mouth without my meaning to say them. Yet I couldn’t find it in me to apologize.

“Are you mad at me?” Jane asked.

“Let’s just say I’m tired of your whiny voice.”

I wanted to take back what I’d said, what Elsie had *made* me say, but instead I walked away from Jane, into the cloakroom, where we hung our coats. Rosie’s bookbag, emptied of everything but her lunch, lay on the floor beside her boots. Elsie perched on a windowsill and watched me.

Without looking at me, Jane hung up her coat, pulled off her boots, snow pants, mittens, and hat, and went into the classroom.

I hurried after her, hoping to make up, but Miss Harrison stopped me with a hug. “I’m so glad you’re back, Annie. We missed you.”

I opened my mouth to tell her how much I’d missed her, but Elsie spoke for me. “I didn’t miss you or anyone else,” I heard myself say. “I hate this school and everyone in it.”

Miss Harrison looked at me as if I’d slapped her. “Annie Browne,” she said, “I’ve never heard you talk like that. Perhaps you’d better march yourself back into the cloakroom and stay there until I give you permission to join the class.”

I shrugged and walked away, my head high to show her I wasn’t sorry and I didn’t care. The room was very quiet. Though I didn’t look at anyone, I knew the other girls were staring at me. The silence rang with shock and dismay. What was wrong with Annie Browne?

Alone except for Elsie, I found myself removing the flu mask from my bookbag and tucking it into Rosie’s. I didn’t want to do it, but I couldn’t stop. It was as if I were outside my own body, watching myself.

On the windowsill, Elsie clapped her hands. “You are now my true friend.”

In the classroom, the girls recited the Pledge of Allegiance and the Lord’s Prayer. Their voices rose and fell in unison. Elsie had made me into an outsider again.

Elsie hovered in front of me, her face close to mine. “See? Soon everyone will hate you,” she jeered, “just the way they hated me.”

I tried to back away, but my shoulders touched the coats hanging from their hooks. I was trapped just inches from her, close enough to see every pore in her pale skin, close enough to smell her earthy odor.

"But you'll have me," she whispered, "you'll always have me, your best friend, your bosom buddy, as they say in those dumb girls' stories I used to read."

"I'd rather have nobody."

She floated above me singing, "I ain't got no body, and nobody cares about me."

"Go away," I shouted. "I hate you!"

Miss Harrison appeared in the cloakroom doorway. "What are you shouting about, Annie? Haven't you behaved badly enough for one day?"

Behind her, my classmates spun around to look, their eyes wide.

I reached out to Miss Harrison. Tears ran down my face, but I couldn't speak because my head was spinning and so was the room. I felt as if were being sucked into a well of darkness. No one was there except Elsie, watching me eagerly.

When I opened my eyes, I was lying on a cot in the health room. Elsie perched on a chair beside me, obviously pleased to see me in trouble.

Nurse Evans leaned over me, her forehead creased into worry lines.

"Do you know where you are, Annie?"

"I'm in the health room."

"Do you remember what you were doing before you fainted?"

I shook my head. "I took off my coat and my boots, my snow pants, mittens, hat, scarf . . ." I let my voice sink low and trail off.

"Do you remember being mean to Jane and sassy to Miss Harrison?"

I widened my eyes. "Why would I be mean to Jane? She's my best friend. I'd never be rude to Miss Harrison. She's my favorite teacher."

While I stumbled through my denials, I felt Elsie pinch me. "I'm your best friend now," she hissed. "And don't forget it."

Without thinking, I said out loud, "Go away and leave me alone!"

Nurse Evans stared at me, shocked. "I'm calling your mother," she said. "I think you've come back to school too soon. A concussion often makes people irritable. They say things they don't mean; they aren't themselves."

I tried to sit up, but Nurse Evans said, "Lie still, Annie, and rest. Your mother will be here soon."

The moment Elsie and I were alone, I said, “You think you’re so clever, but I’ll never let you in my head again.”

Elsie smiled. “Too late, Annie. I’m already in your head—and I don’t plan to leave.”

From a corner, she watched me through narrowed eyes. I tried to stare back, but I couldn’t bear looking at her. Nurse Evans stood just outside the door, explaining my behavior to Miss Harrison.

“Oh, poor dear Annie,” Miss Harrison said. “I knew there must be reason. I’ll talk to Jane. She’s heartbroken.”

Elsie sniffed. “Jane hasn’t seen anything yet.”

I stared at the water stain on the health room ceiling and tried to make its shape into something interesting—anything to avoid thinking about Elsie. A face maybe. I studied it more closely and realized it looked like Elsie. Shutting my eyes, I waited for Mother to arrive.

On the way home, Mother took me to see Dr. Hughes. He spent a lot of time shining lights in my eyes and asking questions. When the exam was over, he said, “I don’t detect any signs of damage or lingering effects. Perhaps you simply need more rest.”

Mother told him about my visit to the library and the state I was in when I came home.

“That must be it. No more long walks until you feel like yourself.”

“Should we keep her home from school for a few days?” Mother asked.

“No, no, that won’t be necessary,” Dr. Hughes said. “Annie’s missed so much school already. We don’t want her to fall behind in her studies.”

While he and Mother chatted, I looked for Elsie. I finally spotted her in a shadowy corner. She was studying a chart of the human skeleton as if she were looking into a mirror.

Dr. Hughes’s eyes followed mine to the spot where Elsie floated.

“What are you looking at, Annie? You’ve been gazing around the room as if you expect to see something.”

“There’s a cobweb in the corner.” I pointed. “Right there. That’s what I was looking at.”

Mother squinted at the ceiling. “I don’t see a cobweb or even a speck of dust, Annie, and even if I did, I certainly wouldn’t mention it. It’s impolite to find fault.”

Dr. Hughes laughed. “I think our Annie was just being helpful.”

Mother handed me my coat and all the other things I had to wear in cold weather. While I put them on, I felt her watching me closely. Elsie watched, too.

As we walked down Portman Street toward home, Mother took my hand in hers as if I were five years old again. “Annie,” she said, “are you certain you’re all right?”

“Dr. Hughes thinks so.”

Elsie was walking just ahead, barefoot, wearing nothing but her silk dress. Every now and then she floated about five feet off the ground and circled Mother and me.

“My,” Mother said, “how much colder it feels in this spot. It must be the shadow of the pine trees.”

Elsie grinned at me and made a face at Mother, who walked on, complaining about the cold.

At home, Elsie followed me upstairs and prowled around my room. Nodding to herself, she touched my dollhouse, my books, my bed, the lacy curtains. She opened the wardrobe and examined my clothes. She scooped up Edward Bear and made him growl.

“Yes, it’s all just as it was the time I visited,” she murmured, “the one day in my whole life I had a friend.”

Smirking at me, she picked up Antoinette, freshly mended and looking as perfect as the day I found her under the Christmas tree. Tipping the doll back and forth, she watched her eyes open and shut and listened to her cry “Mama, Mama.”

I reached for Antoinette, but Elsie tossed her aside. “You have everything I ever wanted. All I wanted was for you to share it with me. But, oh no, you were too selfish.”

The more Elsie talked, the angrier she got. “I needed you to be my friend. Was that too much to ask?”

“If you wanted me to be your friend, you shouldn’t have broken my favorite doll. You tried to make the other girls hate me. You wouldn’t let me play games or seesaw—”

“Oh, pish posh,” Elsie said. “You never gave me a chance to be nice. You shut me out of everything. You and those other girls. Why did you like them better than me? What was so special about them?”

“Annie,” Mother called from downstairs, “is someone up there with you?”

I left my room and scurried down the steps. “No,” I lied. “Nobody’s upstairs. I’m by myself.”

“It sounded as if you were talking to someone.”

I shook my head. “I was just playing with my dollhouse.”

Elsie floated down the stairs and blew cold air down Mother’s neck.

Mother shivered. “The house is so drafty tonight.”

Elsie paused at the front door. “Ta-ta, Annie. See you soon.” Grinning her terrible grin, she passed through the door as if it weren’t there.

“Don’t come back,” I muttered in a voice too low for Mother to hear.

The next morning, Jane came to fetch me just as she had yesterday, but there was no hug this time, not even a smile. She looked as if she feared I might snap at her again.

Perched atop a street sign on the corner, Elsie waved to me. While we waited to cross the street, Jane asked me what I was looking at.

“Nothing, nothing at all.” I raised my voice so Elsie would be sure to hear.

“Why are you shouting?” Jane asked. “Are you still mad at me?”

“Stop asking so many questions, Jane. It’s annoying.”

Jane studied my face. “Miss Harrison says you’re acting this way because of the concussion. It’s making you cross.”

“You’d make anybody cross!” I’d done it again. Elsie was in my head making me say things I didn’t mean.

“Well, pardon me.” Jane ran across the street and up the school steps. When I caught up with her in the cloakroom, she wouldn’t look at me. She’d been crying.

I wanted to apologize, but Elsie pinched me. “Who’s your best friend now, Annie?” she asked.

I glared at Elsie. “You’ll never be my best friend.”

“And I’ll never be your best friend,” Jane said, and left the cloakroom.

I wanted to run after her and explain I hadn’t been talking to her—but how would that sound? As far as Jane knew, she and I had been alone in the cloakroom.

Without saying anything, I went through the morning drill with the others. Roll call, Pledge of Allegiance, Lord’s Prayer. When we sat down, I saw Elsie’s flu mask on Miss Harrison’s desk. My stomach lurched, and I covered my mouth in fear I might vomit.

Miss Harrison held up the mask, holding it by two fingers as if she were displaying a dead mouse. “Rosie found this in her bookbag after school yesterday.”

Everyone stared at Rosie. From the tense way she sat, I knew the mask had frightened her.

Elsie smiled at me from the windowsill. Her desk was gone, so she no longer had a place behind me. I was the last one in my row.

“Rosie and I agree that someone in this room put the mask in her bag. I’d like that person to raise her hand and admit her guilt. I’d also like her to explain why she put it there. I don’t believe influenza germs survive in cold weather, but suppose they do? Suppose Rosie comes down with flu?”

The class sat so still I could hear the girl beside me breathing. The radiator hissed. Someone dropped a pencil. But no one raised a hand.

“Girls,” Miss Harrison said, “this is serious. It will not be taken lightly. Which one of you put the mask in Rosie’s bookbag?”

She looked up and down the rows of desks, staring hard at each of us. With clasped hands, I forced myself to meet her eyes, to look innocent. Annie Browne could not possibly have done such a thing. But her gaze lingered on me.

Miss Harrison sighed. “I expect a written confession to be placed on my desk by the end of the day. If it does not appear, you will all remain after school until the guilty person identifies herself. Now, open your geography books to chapter ten, page fifty-five.”

At ten, we were released for recess. Elsie floated behind me as I crossed the snowy playground. My friends huddled together by the swings. When they saw me, they didn’t smile or even say hello.

Rosie walked up to me. “You put the mask in my bag, didn’t you?”

I backed away, frightened by her anger. “Of course not. Why would I do something like that?”

“You were in the cloakroom all by yourself. It had to be you, Annie.”

The other girls, the whole class, actually, drew in around us.

“I didn’t do it,” I cried. “I swear I didn’t.” I was aware of Elsie sitting in one of the playground swings, her bare feet dangling as she pumped herself higher, a smug expression on her face.

“Did so,” someone shouted. “Did so!”

The first snowball hit me. Then another, then a fusillade. Scared of their anger, I turned and ran. They chased me, throwing more snowballs and

screaming, “Did so, did so!”

The snowballs were hard, as if they’d been packed with ice. They hit my head, my neck, my back, my legs. I couldn’t escape. It was like being chased by a pack of wild dogs. I started crying. How could this be happening? Elsie was dead, but she was still ruining my life. Just as she’d predicted, my friends had turned against me. Now I was the one everyone hated.

Finally Miss Harrison appeared at the school door. The girls dropped their snowballs and stood still.

In the background, Elsie swung higher and higher. No one noticed the swing moving but me.

“What is the meaning of this behavior, girls?” Miss Harrison asked. “You know Annie had a concussion recently. You might injure her.”

Rosie stepped forward, her cheeks red from cold and anger. “Annie did it—she put that mask in my bag, but she won’t admit it!”

“I didn’t,” I cried, “I didn’t.”

“Why accuse Annie?” Miss Harrison asked.

“Because she was the only one alone in the cloakroom.”

Miss Harrison looked at me, long and thoughtfully. “Did you do it, Annie?”

“What if I did? Rosie’s mean and bossy, and I hate her!” Elsie was in my head again, speaking in my voice.

Elsie left the swing and floated to the top of a tree. From there, she watched us.

“Come inside, all of you,” Miss Harrison said.

Elsie drifted down like a falling leaf and entered the school behind Miss Harrison, imitating her walk.

As Elsie brushed past her, Miss Harrison shivered. “My, it’s colder today than I thought,” she said. “Much too cold for outside recess, especially for girls who behave like hoydens.”

As we took our seats, Miss Harrison summoned me to the front of the room. Elsie came with me, causing Miss Harrison to shiver again and button her jacket.

“Now, Annie, tell us why you put the flu mask in Rosie’s bag.”

“She made me do it.”

“Rosie made you do it?” Miss Harrison asked at the same time Rosie said, “I most certainly did not!”

I wanted to say I didn't mean Rosie, but how could I? Elsie was breathing cold air in my face and freezing the words I wanted to say.

"Tell the class the truth, Annie." Miss Harrison was cross with me. I'd never be one of her favorites again. "Why did you put the mask in Rosie's bag?"

"To scare her, that's all, just to scare her. She always pretends to be so brave." I glanced at Rosie, feeling her hatred burning right through Elsie's cold presence. "Look at her. She's not as brave as she pretends."

It was as if I couldn't stop talking, even though every word I uttered made Rosie hate me all the more.

"I'm very disappointed in you, Annie," Miss Harrison said. "Yesterday I blamed your behavior on the head injury you suffered, but I'm beginning to think I was mistaken. For some reason, you seem determined to misbehave."

Before she sent me back to my seat, she told me to apologize to Rosie, but Elsie would have none of that. "Rosie deserved it," I heard myself say. "Why should I apologize?"

Shock ran around the classroom like a swarm of wasps. I heard Jane gasp.

Miss Harrison looked as shocked as everyone else. "I want to see you after school, Annie Browne. I'd send you to the cloakroom, but there's no telling what you might do there."

FOURTEEN

WHEN THE DISMISSAL BELL RANG, Rosie, Jane, Eunice, and Lucy lingered in the doorway long enough to give me hateful looks. Thanks to Elsie, who now seemed to control my face, I gave them the same nasty look.

Miss Harrison summoned me to the front of the room. She sat behind her big oak desk, and I stood in front of her. The real me was terrified. I longed to tell her about Elsie, but my new bosom buddy hovered above Miss Harrison and watched me closely. She wouldn't allow me to say anything except what she wanted me to say. I might as well have been her puppet, dancing on strings she controlled and speaking her words with my voice.

"Well, Annie, what do you have to say for yourself?"

"I don't like Rosie. It would serve her right to catch the flu. Elsie caught it. Why shouldn't Rosie?"

"That's a terrible thing to say, Annie."

I leaned across the desk to look her straight in the eye. "You don't know Rosie like *I* know Rosie. You wouldn't believe the mean things she said and did to poor Elsie. She made that girl's life a misery!"

While Elsie laughed, I leaned even closer. "In fact, it might even be Rosie's fault Elsie died."

At this, Elsie turned a somersault in midair.

Miss Harrison looked me in the eye. "What do you mean, Annie?"

"The day before Elsie came down with the flu, Rosie, Lucy, Eunice, and I were in the park. We saw Elsie all by herself swinging in a slow, sad way. She was wearing a flu mask. Rosie said, 'Let's get her,' and she and the others started chasing Elsie and calling her names, but I didn't because I felt sorry for Elsie. She just wanted to be friends with us, that's all, but Rosie said she was a fat ugly Hun and she hated her."

Elsie leaned over Miss Harrison and blew her cold breath on the back of the teacher's neck.

“Something must be wrong with the furnace,” Miss Harrison murmured before asking me what happened next.

“They caught up with her, and Rosie grabbed the mask, and they trapped her in a circle and sang the ‘in flew Enza’ song. It was awful, Miss Harrison. I tried to make them stop, but they got mad and started calling me names too.”

I finished Elsie’s preferred version of the scene in the park by saying, “If Rosie hadn’t chased her, if she hadn’t stolen her mask, Elsie would probably be alive today.”

Miss Harrison said, “We can’t be sure, Annie, but I’m proud of you for sticking up for that unfortunate child.”

Elsie was now walking on her hands in circles around Miss Harrison’s desk. Her dress had fallen over her head, and I could see her lacy drawers.

I stepped back from the desk. Elsie had begun singing “I see Paris, I see France,” and I wanted to get her out of the classroom before she reached the rude part of the song. “Can I go home now, Miss Harrison?”

“Why on earth do you look everywhere but at me?” Miss Harrison asked me. “I don’t think you’ve looked me in the eye once during our entire conversation. It’s rude, Annie.”

I wanted to tell her I was watching Elsie, but if I did, she’d accuse me of lying. Or of being insane. No matter—Elsie let me say only what she wanted me to say.

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Miss Harrison frowned and tapped her pencil on her desk. “It seems to me I made you stay after school to punish you for something, but I can’t remember what it was.”

“I can go, then?” Out of the corner of my eye I saw Elsie heading for the cloakroom, and I was worried she might be planning a new prank.

“Yes, yes, go ahead, and please try to behave in class.” She smiled a little uncertainly. “You’ve always been one of my best students.”

Followed by my invisible shadow, I left school and walked slowly home.

“It’s no fun walking by yourself, is it?” Elsie asked.

I didn’t answer, just kept going, head down, hating Elsie more than ever. Poor, unfortunate child, indeed. She’d brought all of this on herself.

And now she was bringing it on me. It wasn’t fair. She should be picking on Rosie, not me.

I turned the corner on Portman Street and passed the tall hedge bordering the Steins' house. When I least expected it, Rosie, Lucy, and Eunice leapt out and confronted me.

Rosie pushed her face close to mine so that we were almost nose to nose. "What's wrong with you, have you gone crazy or something?"

"Get away from me!" I shoved Rosie so hard she almost fell down.

"You stink!" Rosie charged at me and pushed me into the hedge. It was the kind that has thorns, and I felt them tear at my clothes and skin.

I struggled to get out of the hedge, but Rosie started punching me, and I fell farther backwards into the thorns. Her fists struck my stomach, my chest, my face. I couldn't get my hands free to defend myself, so I kicked her in the shins.

Rosie staggered back, giving me time to disentangle myself from the hedge. "I hate you," I screamed. "I hate you. You're ugly and common."

A barrage of snowballs hit me, and blood spurted from my nose. I ran for home, and they chased me, just as we'd chased Elsie in the park that day.

I charged into the house and slammed the front door behind me. Safe, I thought, safe from my friends.

But not from Elsie. A closed door couldn't keep her out of the house. "Now you know what it's like to be me!" She danced around, shrieking with laughter.

Mother came running into the hall. "Annie, what happened? Did you fall? Your nose is bleeding, and your face is scratched."

"Rosie pushed me into Mrs. Stein's hedge, the thorny one, and then she and Lucy and Eunice threw snowballs at me and chased me home. They hate me, and I hate them."

While Mother tried to comfort me, Elsie slid down the banister. She'd lost her hair ribbon, and her long, tangled hair hid her face.

"I hate you!" I shouted at her.

Mother gasped. "How dare you speak to me like that!"

With a cry of rage, I broke away from her and ran to the top of the steps. I meant to shove Elsie down the stairs, but my hands went right through her, and I fell instead.

With Elsie's laughter ringing in my ears, I landed at Mother's feet. Her anger gone, she knelt beside me. "Annie, are you all right? Have you broken anything? Did you hit your head?"

I touched my head, afraid it might be bleeding again, but there was no blood and nothing hurt. I sat up cautiously, and Mother helped me to my feet.

"Thank goodness you were still wearing your outdoor clothes," she said. "Your coat and snow pants padded you."

She led me upstairs slowly and carefully, one step at a time, as if I were a toddler just learning to walk.

Elsie watched from the hall chandelier. From the expression on her face, I knew I'd better not try anything like that again. She was already dead. How could she be harmed?

Unlike her, I could definitely be harmed.

In the bathroom, Mother washed my face, wiping the blood away gently so my nose wouldn't begin to bleed again. She dabbed my cuts with iodine, which stung like mad. "Thank goodness you didn't hit your head," she murmured.

After helping me into a warm flannel nightgown, she tucked me into bed. Elsie watched from the shadows, daring me to tell Mother about her.

"I'm worried about you, Annie." Mother sat beside me and stroked my hair. "You haven't been yourself since you hit your head. Are you sure you're well enough to attend school?"

"I don't want to fall behind. Suppose I have to repeat sixth grade?"

"You must promise me not to exert yourself. I'll write Miss Harrison a note to excuse you from gym class and recess until you're fully recovered. Perhaps you should stay indoors at home, as well. This winter has been so cold."

"I'll go to the school library during gym and recess." I smiled at Mother, absolutely delighted. When I had friends instead of enemies, I loved recess, but I'd always hated gym class. Now I dreaded both because they were good opportunities for Rosie and the others to pick on me.

From my rocker in the shadows, Elsie said, "Who's your best friend now? Who's your only friend?"

Just as I was about to yell "Shut up," Mother said, "I'll tell you when dinner's ready, Annie." She kissed me, and I watched her go. Oh, how I yearned to call her back and beg her not to leave me alone with Elsie.

Elsie watched Mother, too. "You don't deserve such a nice mother."

I looked at her in alarm. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing," she said. "Yet."

After dinner, I lingered as long as I could with Mother and Father in the living room. I tried to escape into the dark mystery of *The Moonstone,* but my thoughts kept returning to Elsie. I'd find myself looking around the room, searching shadows and the top of the bookcase for her. I didn't see her, but I knew she was still in the house, probably in my bedroom, plotting and planning her next evil deed.

"Why do you keep staring around the room?" Father asked suddenly.

Keeping my face as blank as possible, I asked, "Am I?"

"Yes, you are. I've been watching you. It's as if you expect to see something that isn't there."

"I guess I was daydreaming."

Mother looked up from the hat she was knitting for me, a blue one with a Nordic pattern and a tassel on top. It was like Rosie's, only hers was green, and I'd wanted it a long time. But not anymore.

"My goodness, Annie, it's eight thirty, way past your bedtime. You've been so quiet I completely forgot you were here."

"It's nice being with you and Father. Can't I stay a little longer?"

"No, indeed. You need your sleep."

"Will you come up with me and tuck me in?"

Father smiled. "A big girl like you?"

"Run along, dear," Mother said. "I'll look in on you later."

Elsie stood in the hall, just outside the band of light from the living room. "I was getting tired of waiting for you."

I followed her upstairs, hating her with a hatred so huge it engulfed my whole self.

FIFTEEN

WHEN I CAME DOWN for breakfast, Elsie floated above me, breathing her cold, moldy breath on my head.

Mother put a steaming bowl of oatmeal on the table. As I began to eat, she said, "I called Rosie's mother last night to complain about her behavior yesterday, but before I spoke a word, she told me Rosie has come down with influenza. She's very ill."

I stared at Mother, speechless. "Just like that? She was fine yesterday. She can't be sick—"

From a dark corner by the stove, Elsie snickered. "Thank you, Annie, for doing what I wanted."

Mother regarded me solemnly. "Rosie insists it's your fault she's sick. She told her mother you hid a flu mask with germs on it in her bookbag."

"It was a prank," I said. "That's all. I didn't think it would make her sick." My heart pounded, and I pushed the bowl of oatmeal away. Jumping to my feet, I ran upstairs to the bathroom and vomited into the toilet.

Elsie watched me from the windowsill. "I hope she dies."

"You're a monster," I cried, "and I detest you. Rosie was my friend until you ruined everything. If she dies, I'll think of a way to harm you."

"How can you harm me? I'm already dead."

"Shut up and leave me alone!" I shouted just as Mother entered the bathroom to see if I was all right.

"Annie—" she began, but I pushed past her and ran downstairs. Grabbing my coat, hat, and mittens, I darted outside.

But not fast enough to escape Elsie. Skimming across the snow ahead of me, she called, "Where do you think you're going?"

I stopped on the corner and pulled on my coat, mittens, and hat. I hadn't had time for snow pants and boots, and the icy wind blew through my long stockings. My shoes slipped on the ice.

Ignoring Elsie, I ran toward Rosie's house. It couldn't be true, she couldn't have the flu. Not Rosie.

When I was almost there, I saw Dr. Hughes coming down the front steps. At the sight of me, he stopped by his car and waited.

"How is she?" I gasped, almost breathless from running.

"Very ill. Her fever's so high she's delirious." He paused and looked at me solemnly. "I'm very concerned about the part you've apparently played in her illness."

I stared at Rosie's bedroom window, its curtains drawn against the light. "I didn't think the mask could hurt her."

"Lucy has told me that your behavior has changed drastically. I know we talked about this earlier when your mother brought you to see me, but it's difficult for me to believe the mild concussion you suffered is responsible."

"You're an ignorant fool." Once again Elsie's words flew out of my mouth. Without looking at him, I turned and ran.

"Annie," he called, "come back here and explain yourself!"

"Run," Elsie said, "run."

I ran behind her. She no longer ran the way she used to, clumsy, arms flapping, but sped like Mercury on winged heels, her dress fluttering, her hair streaming in the wind.

We stopped in front of her house. "Go to my door and knock."

"Why?"

"Just do it."

Helpless to disobey, I climbed the marble steps and lifted the brass knocker. When it thudded against the door, it made a hollow sound, like a stone falling on a coffin lid.

The door slowly opened, and the pale face of Mrs. Schneider peered out at me.

"What do you want?" she asked. "Why aren't you in school?"

Elsie stood beside me, breathing cold air in her stepmother's face. Fearing what she might make me say, I tried to keep my mouth shut, but it opened anyway. "My name is Annie Browne," I said. "I came to tell you that Rosie O'Malley, Jane Anderson, Lucy Hughes, and Eunice Estes are the girls who chased Elsie and stole her flu mask in the park that day. I saw them. They hated her. They were glad she died."

I was about to run away, but Elsie had more to say. "And you were glad, too. You didn't love Elsie. She told me so. And you don't miss her, not even a little bit."

Mrs. Schneider gasped, but without giving her a chance to speak, I dashed down her steps, slipped on the icy sidewalk, picked myself up, and ran.

When the house was out of sight, I stopped and looked for Elsie. She was sitting on the top of a lamppost, grinning her hideous crooked-toothed grin.

"Why did you make me say those things to your stepmother?" I asked.

Like slowly falling snow, she glided to earth beside me. "She'll tell your mother what you said. Dr. Hughes will probably call your mother too."

She smoothed her hair away from her face. "I just love getting you into trouble. Perfect little Annie Browne isn't so perfect now."

I didn't know what to do or where to go. I was scared to face Mother. I was scared to face Miss Harrison. My friends hated me. I'd made Rosie sick and insulted Dr. Hughes. Without a plan, I walked up one street and down another. My toes were so cold I thought they might snap off.

At last I came to the library. With Elsie tagging along, I climbed the steep stone steps and pushed open the heavy door. Gratefully, I breathed in warm air and its familiar smell of old paper and bookbindings and floor polish. On a weekday morning, it was as quiet as church. A few adults sat at tables in the main reading room, their heads bent over books. The high ceiling echoed with someone's cough, and a man pushed a book cart with squeaky wheels down a row of shelves.

I was hoping to avoid notice, but Miss Jones, one of my favorite librarians, looked up as I passed her desk. "Why, Annie, why aren't you in school?"

"I'm still recovering from a concussion," I told her, relieved to speak my words, not Elsie's.

"Oh, yes, you poor dear. I heard about your sledding mishap on High Street. How do you feel now?"

"Better, but I have headaches and strange dreams," I told her.

"Strange dreams?"

"Yes, Dr. Hughes says dreams and even hallucinations can result from a concussion." Why was I telling Miss Jones this?

I glanced at Elsie. She perched on a book cart by Miss Jones's desk, idly flipping the pages of a dictionary.

"Oh, why can't anyone else see you?" I was startled to hear myself speak my thoughts out loud.

"What do you mean, Annie?" Miss Jones stared at me. "See who?"

“Elsie Schneider. She’s right there.” I pointed at the book cart. “Are you blind?”

“Elsie’s dead,” Miss Jones said slowly. “No one is sitting on the cart.”

“Can’t you see the dictionary pages turning?” My voice had risen so high it echoed from the ceiling and the marble columns supporting it. People looked up and frowned at me. Someone said, “Hush.”

“Annie, come with me.” Taking my arm, Miss Jones led me toward her office.

“No, let me go, you stupid cow!” I pulled free and ran out of the library, back into the cold.

“My, my,” Elsie said. “The phone’s probably ringing at your house already. Your mother is having a lovely morning.”

I tried to ignore her, but she skipped ahead and started singing her version of the Enza song.

Rosie had a little bird,
And its name was Enza.
She opened up her window
And in flew Enza.

She sang it over and over again until I thought I would go mad. I was no longer sure who I was—Annie Browne or Elsie Schneider. I wasn’t even sure who’d died, Elsie or me.

Without noticing where I was going, I wandered into the park and sat in a swing, the very swing Elsie had been using the day Rosie had taken her mask.

Elsie sat in the swing next to mine. “This is what friends do,” she said. “They sit together and swing.” She pushed off and pointed her bare toes at the cloudy sky. “Come on, Annie, let’s see who can go highest.”

Without looking at her, I walked away and sat on a bench.

Elsie swung higher and higher. She went right over the top and flew through the air. Landing on a telephone line, she walked back and forth as if she were on a tightrope. “I bet you can’t do this,” she called.

“Oh, why don’t you shut up and leave me alone?”

Just as I spoke, Mother came running across the park, her scarf blowing in the wind. Angrier than I’d ever seen her, she grasped my arm and pulled me up from the bench.

“I’ve been worried to death about you,” she cried. “I didn’t know where you’d gone until the phone started ringing, one call after another. First Dr. Hughes, then Mrs. Schneider, and finally Miss Jones. You’ve been rude and impertinent to all of them, especially poor Mrs. Schneider, who wept into the phone for five minutes before she could tell me what you said to her.”

“Ha,” Elsie shouted from the telephone line. “Hilda only pretended to be sad. She’s glad I’m dead. Glad, glad, glad!” She turned a perfect cartwheel on the telephone line.

“Shut up,” I screamed at her. “I hate the sound of your voice!”

Mother began to cry. “Oh, Annie, what’s happened to you?”

“Slap her face so hard her nose bleeds,” Elsie shrieked at Mother. “Wash her mouth out with laundry soap. Take the hairbrush to her bottom. Lock her in the coal cellar! Do what mothers do!”

Elsie swooped down and seized my hand. Pulling me away from Mother, she ran with me into the park.

Behind us, I heard Mother calling my name. I tried to pull free, but Elsie’s hold on me was too strong to break.

SIXTEEN

I DON'T REMEMBER HOW WE GOT THERE, but we ended up at Elsie's grave. She gazed at the tombstones surrounding us. Her eyes moved from her angel to the cross next to it, and then to a series of small, unadorned markers.

"Where would you like to be buried, Annie?"

I stared at her, scared she meant to murder me.

"Perhaps you could be buried right here." She pointed at a patch of snow beside her grave. "We'd be next to each other, bosom friends for all eternity, whispering secrets to each other in the dark. I'd like that—wouldn't you?"

Horrified by the thought, I shook my head. "No," I said. "No, I would not like it."

Elsie stared past me, seemingly not upset by my answer. "When Rosie dies, perhaps her parents will bury *her* here. Perhaps we'll be bosom friends in the grave. Won't you be jealous then?"

"Rosie isn't going to die!" My voice echoed back to me from the mausoleums on the hill.

"If she does, you'll be her murderer. How will you feel then, Annie Browne?"

"She won't die!"

"Will!"

"Won't!"

"Will!"

We were like children on a playground, screaming at each other, our cries bouncing back to us from tombstones.

Elsie suddenly stopped shouting *will* and pointed to a tall oak tree behind me. "Well, well, the crows are back. Nine of them this time." She gave me a sly look. "Do you know what that signifies, Annie?"

I knew, but I was too cold to think of the answer.

"Eight crows for heaven," she recited, *"but nine crows for hell. And look, here comes one more. Ten crows for the devil's own self."*

I hoped it *was* the devil, come to take Elsie away. But the crows flapped their wings and cawed loudly and resettled themselves on the bare branches. They were silhouetted against the pale, bleak sky, and I was reminded of a drawing or maybe an etching I'd seen of crows perched in a tree like that. The picture had a certain grim fascination just as the crows had now.

Elsie returned her attention to me. "Poor Annie, you're *sooo* cold, aren't you? If we stay here much longer, you'll freeze to death."

She settled herself on the angel's shoulder and laughed down at me. "Just think, your frozen body will be found on my grave. Won't that be touching? Like that book, *A Dog of Flanders*—you know, the one where the boy and his dog freeze to death together, in the church."

Shuddering with cold and fear, I wanted to shake Elsie, hit her, hurt her, but I knew she'd drift away from me like smoke and reappear in a different place. "Please," I croaked, "please let me go home."

"First, answer this question, Annie: Which would you prefer? Rosie to die of the flu or you to die of the cold here in the cemetery? Be honest."

"I don't want either Rosie or me to die."

"That's not the answer."

"But it's the truth."

Elsie brushed snow off the angel's wing tips. "No. The truth is you'd choose Rosie to die and you to live. Anyone would. But no one will admit it. Not even to themselves." Elsie laughed and leapfrogged from tombstone to tombstone, leaving me behind to struggle home through the snow.

I told myself she was wrong. I'd told her the truth. I didn't want either Rosie or me to die. But I couldn't silence the tiny voice that whispered if I really had to choose one of us to die and the other to live, I'd choose Rosie to die and me to live.

All the way home, I prayed, "Please don't let Rosie die, please don't let her die, please don't let her die." Over and over, with every step I took, my prayers rang in my ears. But I never prayed *let me die, not Rosie.* It was always *please don't let Rosie die, please, please, please don't let her die.*

"If you'd prayed like that for me," Elsie whispered from a shadow, "if anyone had, maybe I'd still be alive."

Instead of going home, I walked blocks out of my way to stand in front of Rosie's house. Her window shade was still pulled, but I could see a dim light shining through it.

“Just because her light’s on doesn’t mean she’s alive,” Elsie whispered. “No one leaves the dead alone in the dark. Well, not until they’re buried.”

Ignoring her, I climbed Rosie’s steps and rang the bell. I heard footsteps in the hall. The door opened, and Mrs. O’Malley looked down at me.

“What are you doing here, Annie? It’s after dark. You should be at home.”

“I just wanted to ask how Rosie is.”

“She’s very ill. I hope you’re sorry now about your little prank with the flu mask.”

With that, she shut the door.

“Ha,” said Elsie. “Mrs. O’Malley blames you. *Everybody* blames you. Think what it will be like when Rosie dies!”

I ran, but I couldn’t outrun her. She was always one streetlight ahead, mocking me as she sailed over the snow and ice.

At last I turned the corner and saw my house. The porch light cast sharp shadows across our front yard.

As I ran up the steps, Father opened the door.

“Where have you been this time, Annie?”

“I went to visit my friend Elsie.” Of course that was not what I meant to say.

Mother had joined Father in the hall. They stood together and looked at me, their faces drawn with worry.

“You walked all the way to the cemetery?” Father asked.

“You didn’t even like that girl,” Mother added.

“Elsie was my bosom friend, but I kept it secret because of the others.”

Mother stared at me. “What others?”

“Rosie, Jane, Lucy, Eunice.” I spat their names out as if they were poison.

“I thought they were your friends,” Father said.

“You don’t know what they’re really like. I kept my friendship with Elsie secret from them because they hated her. It was Rosie’s fault Elsie died of flu. She stole her flu mask.”

“I don’t understand,” Mother said.

“You don’t understand.” I was mocking Mother now. I wanted to stop and beg her forgiveness, but Elsie wouldn’t let me. “What do you know about me or who my friends are or what I do or what I think? Nothing!”

Elsie's words continued to pour from my mouth. She was in my head. She'd taken possession of me; she could make me say anything she wanted me to say. Lie after lie.

"You don't care about me! You pretend to love me, oh yes, but secretly you wish I'd die of the flu like poor Elsie!"

As I broke away and ran to my room, I heard Mother ask Father, "Now do you believe me? She's been acting like this ever since she returned to school."

He said, "Perhaps we need to find a different doctor."

I slammed my bedroom door and flung myself on my bed. Elsie sat beside me.

"A different doctor. Hmm." She ran her icy fingers through my hair. "I'm afraid you might end up in the state lunatic asylum out on the Baltimore Pike. Padded cells, straitjackets, cold baths, but don't worry, I'll come to visit you. You'll always have me, no matter what."

"I hate you so much I'd kill you all over again if I could!"

It was at that moment Mother opened my door. "What did you just say, Annie? Who would you kill?"

"Nobody! Leave me alone. I don't want you near me."

Mother hesitated in the doorway.

I was throwing my pillows at her and screaming words I didn't know I knew.

Mother backed away and called Father.

By the time he ran up the steps, I was hurling my collection of china figurines at the wall. My precious little dogs and cats, horses and squirrels, birds and rabbits, broke into fragments. Heads, legs, wings, and tails lay scattered on the floor. My elephant, a gift from Great-aunt Violet and the largest and heaviest thing on the shelf, crashed through my window and disappeared into the night, followed by Edward Bear.

Before Father restrained me, I'd thrown my books at him and Mother, yanked the head off Antoinette, and kicked over the dollhouse.

Panting and struggling to escape his arms, I continued to swear. Mother was crying, but Elsie was perched on my bureau clapping her hands with delight.

"For God's sake, Ida," Father shouted, "call Dr. Hughes!"

By the time, the doctor arrived, I'd fallen asleep from exhaustion. I woke to see him bending over me.

“Go away!” My voice was so hoarse from shouting it was no more than a raspy whisper.

“What’s troubling you, Annie?” he asked.

“Nothing. Everything. The moon, the sun, the stars.”

He looked puzzled. “Is that all?”

I think he meant to try a little humor, but it didn’t work.

“The world,” I whispered, “and all the people in it. Especially you.” I grabbed his arm. “Just make her go away. Then I’ll be me.”

“Who?”

Elsie sat in my rocking chair, smiling to herself. To my surprise, she let me go on in my own words.

“Elsie Schneider, that’s who.” I pointed at the rocking chair. “Can’t you see her sitting there?”

Dr. Hughes looked at the chair. “Annie,” he said softly, “Elsie passed away last fall. She isn’t here.”

I grabbed his arm. I had to make him believe me. “Oh, yes she is, only no one sees her or hears her but me. She’s gotten inside me. She makes me say things, she makes me do things, like putting the flu mask in Rosie’s bookbag. She wanted Rosie to get the flu, she wants her to die and be buried next to her.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because somebody has to make her go away.”

“Listen to me, Annie. You’re fatigued—you need to rest. I’m going to give you a pill to help you relax and sleep.”

He handed me a glass of water and big white pill. I swallowed it and drank all of the water to wash away the bitter taste it left in my mouth.

He sat beside me until the pill took effect. The last thing I saw was Elsie. She was perched on Dr. Hughes’s shoulder, grinning down at me. Then everything whirled away into darkness.

SEVENTEEN

WHEN I AWOKE, I thought I was still dreaming. The room in which I found myself was pleasant enough, but it wasn't my room. How had I gotten there?

In a state of panic, I sat up and called Mother and Father. Where were they? Where was I?

"I know where you are." Elsie sat down on the bed and leaned toward me. She looked very pleased with herself. "Admit it—you know, too."

I shook my head. I was still groggy from the pill Dr. Hughes had given me, and there was a bitter taste in my mouth. My thoughts were crooked, random. They rolled through my head without connecting with one another.

"Am I sick? Am I in the hospital?"

Elsie laughed. "Maybe, maybe not," she said. "Go on, guess again."

I looked around, frantic to find a clue, but the pale blue walls told me nothing.

Elsie sighed. "You could call it a hospital. Some people do. And they definitely think you're sick." She spun her finger and tapped her forehead.

"What are you talking about? I'm not crazy—why would I be in an insane asylum?"

"Have you forgotten the trouble you got into yesterday?"

"But that was your fault. You made me do those things!"

At that moment, the door opened and a doctor I'd never seen came in. Mother and Father followed him. Mother tried to run to my side, but Father stopped her. "Remember, Annie mustn't be overexcited," he whispered as if I weren't meant to hear. "She needs a calm atmosphere and plenty of rest."

"What did you just say?" the doctor asked me.

"I wasn't talking to you."

"Who were you talking to?"

"Nobody." I lay down and pulled the cover up to my chin.

Elsie flitted about the room singing, *"I ain't got no body, and nobody cares for me."* The curtains stirred as she passed the window, the armchair

moved a smidgen closer to my bed, a picture on the wall tipped to the right, but no one noticed any of this. Their attention was fixed on me, the crazy girl.

"Why am I in an insane asylum?" I shouted to be heard over Elsie's racket. "I'm not sick, I'm not crazy, I want to go home!"

"I'm Dr. Benson," the man said in a soft voice, probably meant to calm me. "You're in the Cedar Grove Convalescent Home, not an insane asylum. You're neither sick nor crazy, but your concussion has left you in a precarious state of mind. You're here to get the rest and treatment you need. Depending on your progress and cooperation, you'll be with us a month or so."

"I hope you're satisfied!" I shouted at Elsie, who was now standing next to Father, smirking at me.

Father stared at me. "Why should I be satisfied, Annie? Believe me, this is the last thing I want for you, but after last night—"

It was rude, I know, but I interrupted him. "I wasn't talking to you, Father."

Dr. Benson looked around the room with exaggerated care and said, "I don't see anyone here but your father, your mother, and me."

"That's the whole problem," I cried. "No one sees her but me."

"We're concerned about your insistence that Elsie Schneider is here," the doctor said, still speaking in that soft, low voice. "Surely you know she died last fall."

He paused and looked at me closely. "Do you feel guilty about Elsie's death? Did you say or do something you regret?"

"Yes, you did, yes, indeed you did," Elsie hissed, "and I'm here to make you pay for it."

"It wasn't just me—it was all of us—but she's taking it out on me. She won't leave me alone. She says she's my bosom buddy, but I HATE HER!" I was screaming and crying and trying to say everything before Elsie stopped me and filled my mouth with her words.

"And now she's here in this very room," I babbled on. "She torments me day and night and makes me say and do terrible things!"

When I finally ran out of words, I looked at Elsie. She smiled as if my performance pleased her.

Dr. Benson spoke to my parents in a whisper. I couldn't hear his remarks, but whatever he said made Elsie smile wide enough to show her nasty teeth,

stained as if she'd been eating dirt.

A servant arrived with my breakfast, a soft-boiled egg in a cup, toast soldiers, and orange juice—just what I had at home.

While I picked at the food, Dr. Benson told my parents they could stay with me for a couple of hours.

"After you leave," he went on, "Annie will eat lunch and begin a program of activities designed especially for her. Arts and crafts, calisthenics, a tutor to help with her school work. If all goes well, she'll be permitted to spend an unsupervised hour or so in the library. Of course, she'll see me at least once every day."

"You'll like that, won't you?" Mother asked me. "You've always enjoyed arts and crafts, and it will be good to keep up with your schoolwork."

In hope I'd be free of Elsie during the activities designed just for me, the girl in a precarious state of mind, I nodded enthusiastically. Everyone looked pleased—except Elsie. I knew she detested being left out.

Dr. Benson excused himself. As he left the room, Elsie made faces at him, but of course no one but me noticed.

Father took a seat in an armchair near my bed, Mother sat on the bed beside me, and Elsie swung by her knees from the curtain rod, hair hanging over her face, showing off her lacy bloomers again.

After I'd eaten what I could, Mother carried the tray to a small table near the door. Returning to her seat beside me, she touched my hand gently. "You know Elsie isn't here, Annie."

"And she's not responsible for your behavior," Father added.

"She's right there." I pointed at Elsie. "Why can't you see her?"

"Nobody's there, Annie." Mother was close to tears, but Elsie crowed with laughter.

"She's right," Elsie said. *"I ain't got no body!"*

"Shut up!" I yelled at her.

Mother drew away from me, but Father said, "Remember, Ida, Annie's not talking to you. She's talking to Elsie."

When Mother gave in to tears, Father left his chair and sat beside me on the bed. Putting an arm around me, he said, "You must believe me. Elsie is a figment of your imagination. That's why no one else can see her."

"Oh, Father." I pressed my face against his jacket and wept. He and Mother did their best to comfort me, but it was hopeless. As long as they

believed Elsie to be a figment of my imagination, they couldn't help me. No one could.

For the rest of their visit, Mother and Father tried to cheer me up. We played a couple of games of Parcheesi, and I won both. Probably they let me win—anything to keep the crazy girl happy. Father said it was because my friends and I played Parcheesi often and he and Mother hadn't played for years. They were out of practice.

Next Father pulled a set of Author cards out of his jacket pocket. I was the first to match my four authors with their books—Charles Dickens, Sir Walter Scott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Louisa May Alcott. Father almost won, but I managed to edge him out with *Oliver Twist,* thereby completing my last set.

Mother was hopelessly behind, which made her laugh. "I need to read something besides cookbooks."

"It's a matter of getting the right cards," Father said. "Winning has nothing to do with reading the author's books."

We began another round. As we asked each other for cards, I think we all forgot where I was and why. But I couldn't help wondering what Elsie was doing while we amused ourselves with games. She was very quiet—no interruptions, no taunts, no antics. From time to time, not often enough for my parents to notice, I looked around the room. Morning sunlight cast shadows as it streamed through the windows, but Elsie wasn't hiding in them. Nor was she behind Father's chair, lurking in corners, or hanging upside down from the curtain rod. She was definitely not here, and I began to hope she really was a figment of my imagination.

Just as we finished our third game of Authors, which Mother won, a nurse entered the room and told Father and Mother that visiting hours were over for the day. Mother hugged me tearfully and begged me to get well and come home soon. Father presented me with a couple of books he and Mother had picked out—*Seventeen* and *Anne's House of Dreams.*

"I hope you haven't read these yet," he said as he put them on the bedside table.

"Oh, I've been especially wanting to read *Seventeen.* I've heard it's very funny, much like the Penrod books, which you know I love. Only for someone a little older—like me."

I picked up *Anne's House of Dreams.* "This is the newest. I've read all the ones that came before."

I didn't tell Father I'd lost interest in the Anne books now that Elsie had entered my life. It hurt to read them and think of Rosie and the fun we had when we were friends.

I hugged them both. "Please come tomorrow."

After they left my room, I listened to their footsteps until I couldn't hear them anymore. They hadn't wanted to go—I knew that—but I slid under the covers and cried until a woman entered the room. She introduced herself as Nurse Baker. From the way she looked at me, I was certain she knew all about me and my precarious state of mind.

"It's almost time for lunch, Annie," she said in a no-nonsense manner. "Time to get out of bed, wash, and dress. You must look presentable when you meet the others."

"The others?"

"You'll take your meals in the dining room, just like everyone else. No pampering for you, my girl."

I disliked Nurse Baker already. She was cross and sharp-spoken and bossy. I almost wished Elsie were here to torment her in some way.

Without looking at her, I washed my face and hands in the bowl she'd brought. I used the pot she pulled out from under the bed, although it mortified me to do so. I put on the plain blue dress she gave me, thick stockings, and unfashionable button-top shoes.

"Why can't I wear my own clothes?"

"We don't want anyone having nicer things than someone else." With that, she handed me a brush and comb and a hair ribbon.

When I was washed, dressed, and combed, she looked me over and frowned. "I suppose you'll do."

I followed Nurse Baker down a long straight hall lined with open doors. Each room was exactly like mine. I hadn't thought to look at the number and hoped I could find it when lunch was over.

Before we entered the dining room, she gave me a schedule of my activities. "Don't forget," she said, "arts and crafts in Room 30-B immediately after lunch. Be on time. Punctuality is important."

With that, she handed me over to a tall, dour woman wearing a black dress with a white apron over it and a small white cap on her head. Without a smile, she told me to follow her.

Despite the number of people sitting at several long tables, the dining room was quiet. Everyone looked at me as I walked past, but no one smiled

or said hello.

They were all much older than I was, most of them adults at least Mother's age, but some quite elderly. They didn't smile, just looked. Was smiling forbidden?

I felt lost and sad. It was Elsie who belonged here, not me, but whoever heard of putting a ghost into a convalescent home?

The woman seated me at the end of a table. My chair faced the window. Outside the winter sun sparkled on snow, and I wished I were free to leave the dining room and go outside.

The women at the table glanced at me and continued chatting about their various ailments and unappreciative relatives. I supposed they thought someone as young as I was could be of no interest to them. Certainly I had nothing to contribute to their conversational topics. Except for Elsie—describing her might stop the talking entirely. And convince them that I was truly a lunatic.

The old lady sitting beside me caught my eye and smiled. She had a kind face, but her eyes were sad. "My name is Mrs. Jameson," she said in a voice so low I had to lean close to hear her.

"I'm Annie Browne."

"Annie—I've never met a person named Annie I didn't like." She smiled again. "Don't let those women hurt your feelings," she told me. "They're decidedly unfriendly. I've been here a week and haven't exchanged one word with them. Not even hello."

She paused a moment, but before I said anything, she added, "Perhaps you and I can become friends."

I wasn't sure a girl my age could be friends with a woman her age, but I needed someone to talk to. I'd pretend she was my grandmother. With her pink cheeks and white hair, she certainly looked the part.

"That would be nice," I told her.

"Do you enjoy reading?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, I love to read." While we ate our chicken noodle soup, we talked about books. We both enjoyed Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens. She recommended Willa Cather's novels, and I recommended *Seventeen.* She told me she'd loved *The Magnificent Ambersons,* Tarkington's best book, she claimed. "But perhaps a bit slow, compared to Penrod's antics."

When the meal ended, the other women walked away, still engrossed in conversation, but Mrs. Jameson lingered a moment. Taking my hand, she

said, “I’ve enjoyed talking to you, Annie Browne.” She paused and peered into my eyes before adding, “I hope you don’t mind my saying so, but something about you worries me.”

“Oh, you needn’t be concerned about me,” I said quickly. “I’m not crazy or anything like that. I crashed my sled and got a concussion. Dr. Benson says it’s left me in a precarious state of mind. That’s why I’m here.” I smiled and shrugged to emphasize I was fine, no cause for her to worry.

Mrs. Jameson held my hand tighter, as if she feared I might run from her. “No,” she said softly. “It’s more than that. You’re frightened. I see it in your eyes.”

I looked away, but I didn’t pull my hand from hers. I longed to tell her what really frightened me, but she’d never believe it. So, keeping Elsie a secret, I said, “I’m scared Dr. Benson will make me stay in Cedar Grove for a long, long time. I want to go home. I miss Mother and Father. I miss my friends and school and sleeping in my own bed at night.”

“Of course you do. I miss my family and my home, too.” Mrs. Jameson looked at me closely. “But something else is weighing heavily upon you, Annie. I don’t know what it is, but I sense deep sorrow, loneliness, fear—”

Before I had a chance to speak, a crew of cleaning women entered the room. Some carried mops and buckets; others carried trays and rags. One of them scowled at Mrs. Jameson. “Lunch is over,” she said. “The dining room is closed until dinner. We need to clean up, you know.”

“I beg your pardon,” Mrs. Jameson said. “We’ll leave at once.”

Still holding my hand, she led me into the hall. “We don’t have time to talk now,” she said, “but if you ever wish to confide in me, I’ll be happy to listen. And to help you if I can.”

Giving me a pat on the shoulder, Mrs. Jameson walked away. I watched her go. In the sunlight streaming through the windows, her white hair shone.

After she turned a corner, I lingered in the hall. What did Mrs. Jameson sense about me? What worried her? What did she see in my eyes?

“You,” someone called to me, “what are you doing in the hall?” A stern-faced woman in a black skirt and white blouse approached me.

“I’m supposed to be in arts and crafts,” I told her, “but I can’t find the room.”

“Come with me,” she said. “And hurry. You’re already late.”

Silently I followed her down the hall, relieved that I hadn’t gotten into trouble.

EIGHTEEN

ARTS AND CRAFTS met in a big sunny room with tall windows on one wall. Patients sat on stools at high tables. Everyone was making clay bowls.

A plump, rosy-faced woman approached me. “I’m Miss Ellis,” she said, “and you must be Annie Browne.”

I looked at her smiling face and wondered what she knew about me. “I’m sorry I’m late,” I apologized. “I couldn’t find the room.”

“It’s a big place, but you’ll figure it out in no time.” She led me to a table under a window and introduced me to the three women already sitting there. They glanced at me and returned to their conversation. As usual, they made no effort to include me. I was a child, of no interest to them.

Miss Ellis gave me a ball of gray clay. “We’re making pots today. Be creative,” she said in a perky voice. “Express yourself, Annie.”

I studied the damp clay with distaste. It was cold and slippery, and I hated the way it felt. I looked at Miss Ellis in hope she’d give me a hint about making a pot, but she’d gone to the other side of the room to help an old lady. Not knowing what else to do, I rolled out snakelike coils of clay and fashioned a lopsided bowl. It looked as if a kindergartner had made it.

Clumsy as it was, Miss Ellis raved as if it were a masterpiece. Surely she saw my bowl for what it was—a misshapen mud ball. When she wasn’t looking, I mashed the bowl with my fist, rolled the clay into a ball, and stuck it to the underside of the table.

Next, I spent an hour with Dr. Benson. We’d barely gotten through the niceties of *how are you, I’m fine,* when he asked if Elsie had joined us.

I said quite honestly she wasn’t there.

He leaned toward me, obviously pleased with my response. While he asked more questions, mainly about Elsie, her death, and my feelings about it, my mind raced ahead. Even if Elsie returned, I’d tell Dr. Benson and my parents she was gone. I’d say perhaps she’d been a figment of my imagination after all. I’d say I felt terrible about teasing Elsie the day before

she caught flu. I'd say I was sorry I hadn't at least tried to defend her. I'd say she wasn't really as bad as everyone thought. I'd say she hadn't deserved to be treated so badly.

Mostly lies, but I was certain it was what Dr. Benson and Elsie wanted to hear. If I kept Elsie's presence to myself, maybe he'd let me go home.

When Dr. Benson told me my hour was over, he said, "I'm very pleased with the progress we've made today. If you continue to do well, Annie, perhaps you can go home in a week or so."

I almost skipped for joy on the way to my room. Dr. Benson was pleased. We were making progress. If my state of mind was less precarious, he might send me home as soon as next week. I'd be good, so good. I wouldn't get into trouble. No matter what she did, I'd resist Elsie. If I ignored her, maybe she'd give up and go back to the cemetery. How happy I'd be then.

All those thoughts came to a stop when I opened the door to my room. Elsie grinned at me from her perch on the curtain rod. She'd found a red crayon somewhere and scrawled bad words on the walls. She'd drawn naughty pictures as well, crudely done but recognizable as certain body parts no one ever mentions.

In despair, I looked at what she'd done. How was I to explain it? Who could have done it but me?

"What a bad girl you've been, Annie," Elsie said with that hideous smirk of hers. "I had no idea you knew so many naughty words. And those pictures. What will Dr. Benson say when he sees this?"

Elsie dropped to the floor and skipped across the room to me. "Instead of sending you home," she said, "he'll pack you off to the lunatic asylum. But don't worry, I'll go with you. I'll never desert you, never, never, never."

With that, she jumped out the window and left me to deal with what she'd done. Shaking with rage, I tried to wipe the words and drawings off the walls, but I succeeded only in smearing my hands with red crayon.

Behind me, the door opened, and I heard a gasp. I whirled around to see Nurse Baker staring at the wall, clearly horrified by Elsie's handiwork.

"Good Lord," she cried. "What kind of a girl are you?"

"I didn't do this!"

"Don't lie to me! Just look at your hands—you've got red crayon all over them."

"I was trying to clean it off." My voice rose. "I don't even know what the words mean!"

“I’m sending for Dr. Benson!”

“No, no, please don’t tell him. Please, I beg you.” I threw myself at her and tried to keep her from leaving. “You must believe me, I didn’t do this, I didn’t!”

She freed herself from me. “You’re hysterical!” Without warning, Nurse Baker drew her arm back and slapped my face so hard I almost fell down.

“What’s going on here?” Dr. Benson stood in the doorway. “I heard the noise from my office.”

“I didn’t do it,” I wailed. “Elsie did. She’s not gone, after all.”

“I caught Annie Browne in the act,” Nurse Baker told him. “Just look at her hands.”

“I’m looking at the red mark on her face. Did you slap her?”

“The girl was hysterical. In my family, a good slap always put an end to that sort of behavior.”

“We do not strike patients here, Nurse Baker. One more incident like this, and you will be dismissed without a recommendation. Please leave now. I’ll deal with Annie.”

Nurse Baker sniffed and left the room in a huff. As soon as she was gone, Dr. Benson turned his attention to the wall. “What’s the meaning of this, Annie? I thought you were making real progress, but now . . .” He frowned. “Are you blaming Elsie?”

“Yes,” I cried. “Yes. Who else could have done it?”

He gazed at me sadly. “Who else, indeed?”

Even though he didn’t believe me, I said it again. “*Elsie* did it. She hates me. Don’t you see? She wants to make me pay for not being her friend.”

“When will you give up this obsession with Elsie? The girl died months ago. She can’t make you do anything. Whether you admit or not, you defaced this wall. *You,* Annie, no one but you.”

No, I thought, *I didn’t, I didn’t, I didn’t.* It made no sense to say it out loud. The more I insisted Elsie was real, the crazier I seemed.

Dr. Benson went to the door and looked back at me. “I’ll have someone bring you a bucket of soapy water and rags so you can scrub off this filth.”

I sat on my bed and stared at Elsie’s handiwork. There was no chance now of going home next week. Or even next month.

What was to become of me? Only a crazy girl would insist a ghost was responsible for those words and drawings. Only a crazy girl would blame a

dead girl. I was sure I wasn't crazy. I was sure Elsie was real . . . but what if she wasn't? What if I really was crazy?

My thoughts were interrupted by a cleaning woman. Setting down a bucket of soapy water and a handful of rags, she stared at the wall.

"Shocking," she said. "Shocking that a young girl like yourself should know such things."

Looking at me as if I were a demon, she left the room and shut the door behind her.

With a sigh, I dipped the rag into the water and began to scrub. And scrub and scrub. I scrubbed until my arms ached, but the words and drawings remained, paler, harder to see, but still visible.

Part of my punishment was to eat dinner in my room. That was fine with me. Except for Mrs. Jameson, I didn't enjoy the company of the others.

Nurse Baker brought my tray. She looked at the wall and sniffed in disgust. "I can still see those words and drawings. Your room will need a few coats of paint to cover them up. That will cost your father a pretty penny."

"I did my best," I muttered, "but—"

"Your best wasn't good enough, was it?" Nurse Baker put my dinner tray down and left the room. Her starched skirts rustled in disapproval. She probably thought a few more slaps might improve me.

After I finally fell asleep, Elsie woke me by snatching off my covers. She'd brought the cold of winter with her, and I tried to pull my blanket back. Taking the blanket with her, she leapt to the top of my wardrobe and grinned at me.

"I see they made you scrub the wall," she said. "Didn't they like my artwork?"

I huddled on my bed, shivering without my covers. "I hate you."

Elsie laughed. "Didn't you miss me? Didn't you wonder where I went?"

"Wherever it was, I wish you'd stayed there."

"If you insist, I'll tell you. Or even if you don't insist, I'll tell you anyway." She jumped down from the wardrobe, leaving the blanket out of my reach. "I went to Rosie's house, to see how she is, poor girl."

She paused. "Aren't you going to ask me how your former best friend is?"

I hugged my knees tight to my chest and waited. The gleeful expression on her face scared me.

"Well, I'm happy to tell you my plan worked. Rosie died last night."

"No," I whispered. "That can't be true. You're lying. You always lie."

"Except when I tell the truth," Elsie said. "Which happens to be what I'm doing now. I saw Rosie in her coffin, laid out in the parlor just like I was. As dead as dead can be."

"No, no, no," I whispered.

"Yes, yes, yes!" Elsie hopped around the room singing, "I had a little bird, and I named her Enza. I opened Rosie's window, and in flew Enza!"

I pulled the pillow over my head, but I could still hear her.

Snatching the pillow away, she leaned over me. "And guess what else? Everybody says it's *your* fault. You put that mask in her bookbag and she caught flu and now she's dead. You murdered her, everyone says so, and you'll go to jail for the rest of your miserable life!"

"You made me put the mask in Rosie's bag!" I screamed.

"And how will you prove that?"

"I hate you! You're a monster," I screamed.

Elsie laughed again and returned to the top of my wardrobe. "What a nice warm blanket," she called. "Thanks for giving it to me."

Nearly frozen, I huddled on my bed and wept. I saw Rosie laughing, skipping rope, bouncing a ball, and shouting, "One, two, three O'Leario." Rosie my friend, Rosie the wild girl, more fun than anyone in the world. I saw her sick with flu, drenched with perspiration, burning with fever, hallucinating. I saw her still and cold and white, lying in her coffin while Jane and Lucy and Eunice wept. And blamed me.

Why had I put the mask in Rosie's bookbag? Why hadn't I fought Elsie? What kind of a person was I?

And all the while, as I lay there tormenting myself with guilt, Elsie perched above me on the headboard of my bed, swinging her bare feet in my face and singing, "The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out, the worms play pinochle on your snout. They eat your eyes, they eat your nose, they eat the jelly between your toes."

NINETEEN

IN THE MORNING, Elsie was gone, and my blanket was on the floor. Wrapping it around me, I sat on my bed and wept again for Rosie.

A nurse came to remind me I was expected to be in the dining room for breakfast. She was new. Maybe Nurse Baker had quit and I'd never see her again. I told the nurse I wasn't hungry.

She looked at me closely. "Have you been crying?"

I wiped my nose with the back of my hand. "Yes."

"I guess you're sorry about what you did to your room." She looked at the wall and shook her head. "I see you didn't scrub it all off."

"I tried." I sniffled and snuffled.

"I'll bring breakfast to your room. I'm sure Dr. Benson will want to see you as soon as you've finished eating." She turned to leave but stopped to say, "In the meantime, get dressed, Annie. Comb your hair. Wash your face."

I did as she asked, but I didn't eat the breakfast she brought. Nor did I go to see Dr. Benson. I'd caused Rosie's death. How was I to face anyone?

A little later, Dr. Benson found me sitting in my rocking chair, looking out the window.

"Nurse O'Brien told me you've been crying," Dr. Benson said. His voice was gentler than usual. "I suppose you're upset about last night. Nurse Baker shouldn't have slapped you."

I shook my head. "I just found out my friend Rosie has died of the flu and—" I broke down again.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Annie. That's sad news indeed." He sat down on my bed and looked at me with sympathy. "But who told you? How do you know?"

Before I could stop myself, I blurted, "Elsie told me last night. She says it's my fault. She says I murdered Rosie, and I'll be sent to jail, but it's *her* fault, not mine! She made me kill Rosie."

Dr. Benson's expression changed from sympathetic to disappointed. "Oh, Annie, I've told you again and again, Elsie is dead. She can't tell you anything. She exists in your mind and nowhere else."

"If you'd just try, you'd see her yourself. She's outside right now." I pointed at Elsie, who was pirouetting on the lawn. "Why can't you admit she's there? You must see her, you must!"

"Please, Annie, stop shouting. Take a deep breath, relax." Dr. Benson took my hand. "Now, tell me why you think you killed Rosie."

Even though I knew it was useless to explain, I said, "Elsie hated Rosie. She wanted her to die. She made me put her flu mask in Rosie's bookbag, and Rosie caught the flu, and now she's dead."

"Oh, Annie, my dear child, where do you get these ideas? You didn't kill your friend. The flu did."

"But the mask," I cried. "It was full of Elsie's germs."

"The mask had nothing to do with it." He shook his head. "And neither did Elsie. It's very unfortunate that your friend died, but no one, least of all you, is responsible for her death."

I looked outside. Elsie had climbed into a tree near the window and made herself comfortable on a branch. She swung her feet and made faces at me. Laughing, she flipped over to hang by her knees from the branch. If the window had been open, I could have touched her.

"Give up, Annie," she said. "He's never going to believe you, and neither is anyone else. The more you say, the crazier people think you are. Didn't I tell you I was a secret not to reveal? Yet you blab and blab and blab and blame me for everything."

While Elsie jeered at me, Dr. Benson rang for a nurse and asked her to bring warm milk and buttered toast for me.

"I don't want milk or toast."

"You didn't eat your breakfast."

"I'm not hungry."

"You need nourishment."

When Nurse O'Brien came back with a tray, I found I was hungry after all. I'd no sooner drunk the milk and eaten the toast than I realized I was very tired. I lay on my bed and closed my eyes.

Dr. Benson covered me with a blanket. "A good nap is just what you need, Annie." His voice sounded far away. I was asleep before he left the room.

The next thing I knew, Nurse Baker was shaking me awake. “It’s almost lunchtime, you lazy girl.”

Still groggy from my nap, I stared at her in confusion.

“Did you hear me?” she asked. “Get ready for lunch. Now.”

“I don’t feel well,” I told her.

“Do as you’re told.” She scowled at me, her face creased with dislike. “I have no time to spare for a girl like you.” With that, she left the room. The door slammed shut behind her.

I stood up slowly. Even though I’d been asleep, I was tired. And lightheaded. Too dazed to stand, I sank down on the bed and stared about me in confusion.

How long had I been asleep? And why was I so sad?

“You know why you’re sad.” Elsie materialized from the shadows behind the wardrobe. “Here’s a hint—somebody died. I hated her. You liked her. So I’m glad and you’re sad.”

It came back to me then—Rosie was dead, and it was my fault. I’d be sent to jail. Or to the state lunatic asylum.

“Go away,” I screamed at Elsie. “Go away and leave me alone!”

The door opened, and Dr. Benson stood on the threshold. “What is it now, Annie? Why are you screaming at me?”

I shook my head and said nothing. What was the sense of telling him I was screaming at Elsie? She was gone now anyway. The cold air she’d left behind eddied around my ankles and chilled me all the way to my knees.

Dr. Benson smiled at me. “Now that you’re finished screaming at me, you might like to hear some good news.”

For a moment, I hoped he’d say he was sending me home, but instead he said, “I phoned your mother while you were sleeping and asked her about Rosie.” He took my hands in his. “Rosie isn’t dead, Annie. In fact, she’s out of danger now. Your mother has no idea where you got that notion. She told me Dr. Hughes expects Rosie to be back in school in a few weeks.”

I stared at him, afraid to believe what he was saying. “But Elsie said—”

He pressed a finger to his lips. “Not another word about Elsie. You must have dreamed Elsie told you Rosie was dead. Believe me, Rosie is alive and recovering. Concentrate on her, and forget about Elsie. She doesn’t exist.”

Oh, if only that were true. At this very moment, Elsie was perched on top of the wardrobe, making faces at Dr. Benson. While I watched, she took a pebble out of her pocket and threw it at him.

The pebble struck his leg and startled him. Puzzled, he looked around. When nothing else happened, he shrugged and laughed. “Now you’ve got me imagining things, Annie.”

Without noticing the pebble on the floor, he suggested going to lunch. We walked to the dining room with Elsie behind us, and Dr. Benson shivered. “The hall’s drafty today,” he said. “I’ll have someone check the furnace.”

At the dining room door, Dr. Benson told me to eat a good lunch. “Cheer up,” he said. “Smile. We’ll talk soon.”

Elsie followed me into the room and whispered in my ear. “He’s an idiot. *Cheer up, smile, we’ll talk soon*—what nonsense.”

In the cold air Elsie stirred up, people buttoned their sweaters and complained about the chill.

Without looking at anyone, I made my way to my seat across from the window and stared at the snowy lawn. Someone had made a row of snowmen along the driveway, and in the blink of an eye, Elsie had gone outside to knock their heads off one by one. I watched her snatch a tall silk hat from a snowman and put it on her head. Then she took a long red scarf from another and wrapped it around her neck.

Mrs. Jameson tapped my shoulder. “My goodness, Annie, look outside. The wind must be very strong. The snowmen are losing their heads. See?”

She pointed as Elsie toppled the last one. “Isn’t that strange?” she asked.

It was indeed strange. Stranger than Mrs. Jameson realized.

“It’s almost as if somebody is knocking off their heads,” she said slowly. “You don’t see anyone out there, do you?”

I almost choked on my soup. “No, no, of course not. Do you see anyone?”

“For a moment, I could have sworn I saw—” She shook her head. “No, I’m mistaken. How silly of me. It’s just a hat blowing in the wind. And a scarf.”

But Mrs. Jameson continued to gaze out the window as if she saw Elsie running across the snow, the long red scarf streaming behind her.

Mrs. Coakley leaned across the table to get Mrs. Jameson’s attention. “I don’t know why you waste your time talking to that girl. Have you heard what she did to the walls of her room? She scribbled dirty words and dirty pictures all over them. She’s a guttersnipe with a filthy mind.”

Mrs. Jameson stared at her. “I don’t believe you, Hester. Annie is a sweet child. She’d never do something that vile.”

Mrs. Coakley shrugged. “If you don’t believe me, ask someone else. It’s been the talk of Cedar Grove.” She leaned closer. “Here’s the amazing part: she swears she didn’t do it. I ask you—who else could have done it?”

“I’m not a liar!” I shouted. “I didn’t do it!”

A murmur ran around the room. I’d spoken louder than I’d meant to.

Mrs. Coakley drew herself up like a balloon about to explode. “How dare you speak to me like that! I’ve a good mind to report you.”

One of the servers looked our way, and Mrs. Jameson took my arm. “Come with me, Annie. Mrs. Coakley needs a moment to calm down.”

The two of us left the room. No one said anything, but I could sense their disapproval as they watched us go by. As soon as we were in the hall, I heard the buzz of whispered conversations. *Shocking, disgusting, what sort of home does she come from . . .*

“Let’s go someplace where we can talk,” Mrs. Jameson suggested. “We have half an hour of free time.”

We found a seat in a quiet corner in the library, but I couldn’t relax until I’d studied every shadow and every dark corner for signs of Elsie. She came and went so quickly—she could be anywhere. If she saw me talking to Mrs. Jameson, she’d do something horrible, I knew she would.

“What’s worrying you, Annie?” Mrs. Jameson asked. “You’re a bundle of nerves today.”

“Nothing, I’m fine.” I fidgeted with my hair. Had I remembered to comb it?

“Did Mrs. Coakley upset you?”

“I didn’t scribble those things on my wall.”

“Perhaps you’ve just forgotten,” she said. “Sometimes I do things I don’t remember. I’m told I broke all my wedding china the day my husband died. Threw it against the wall and smashed every single plate, cup, and saucer. I suppose I was out of my mind with grief. Perhaps it was something like that with you. You were upset, angry, sad—”

“No, it’s not like that. I *know* I didn’t do it. Someone else did.” I should have stopped talking then, but the words came tumbling out and I couldn’t control them. “She says she’s my friend, but she’s not. She hates me, and she won’t leave me alone. She goes everywhere I go and gets me into trouble whenever she can. She makes me do terrible things.”

Mrs. Jameson stared at me. “Who is this girl?” she asked. “Where does she come from? Why does she hate you?”

I looked into the corners again and peered into the shadows. Even though I couldn't see Elsie, I sensed her presence. She was nearby, watching and listening.

"Why are you looking in the corners?" she asked. "What do you expect to see?"

"Her," I whispered. "She could be anywhere."

Mrs. Jameson put her arm around me. "You're trembling, Annie."

"I'm so afraid of her."

"If you're in danger, you must tell someone."

"I've tried, but no one believes me. Dr. Benson says she's not real. He insists I imagine her. He claims I blame her for the bad things *I* do."

"Is she invisible to everyone but you?" Mrs. Jameson held me tighter.

A branch tapped against the window windowpane. Elsie stood outside peering at us through the glass. She made a hideous face when she saw me looking at her. "Not another word, Annie," she warned.

Mrs. Jameson looked at the window in alarm. "Why is it so dark out there?"

Elsie shook her head and pressed a finger to her lips. "I'm warning you. Don't tell that old lady anything."

"I have to leave," I said. "It's time for arts and crafts."

"No, stay—talk to me," Mrs. Jameson begged. "Let me help you."

Ignoring her, I left her in the library and ran down the hall.

Elsie ran beside me. "Stay away from that old lady," she whispered. "Don't talk to her. I won't allow you to have any friend but me."

She followed me into the arts and crafts room. Miss Ellis had set open jars of tempera paint on the tables. Some of the women were already painting winter scenes—children ice-skating or sledding. Snowmen. Snow-covered fir trees. Maybe I'd paint a ghost in a snowy graveyard, a crow for sorrow in a tree, an angel with a mean face, a broken sled. That would at least be original.

But before I had a chance to lift my brush, Elsie dipped her finger into a jar of red paint and wrote a bad word on my drawing paper. When I tried to take the jar away from her, I upset it and several others. In no time, a pool of various colors spread across the table, ruining pictures and dripping onto the floor. The women at my table hastened to move out of range of the paint, but most of them were spattered.

Not only did Miss Ellis blame me for the mess, but she accused me of laughing as if it were the best prank ever. It was Elsie who'd laughed, of course, but she'd made it sound like me. Defeated, I sat down at a small table in the corner and took the pencil Miss Ellis gave me.

"Draw a snow scene with that."

When I left the arts and crafts room, Elsie followed me to my private tutoring class where she made sure I failed every quiz. Speaking for me, she told Mr. French he was a lousy teacher. Like Miss Ellis, he said he'd report my behavior to Dr. Benson. Thanks to my so-called friend, I was doomed to be in trouble constantly.

After class, Elsie said, "See what happens when you talk to other people?"

Without answering, I went to my room and slammed the door in her face. Of course a shut door didn't keep Elsie from following me inside and taking her favorite perch on the curtain rod.

Imitating Mrs. Jameson, she said, "Oh, Annie, stay, talk to me, let me help you, you poor dear, sweet girl."

"I hate you," I muttered.

"Oh, boo-hoo-hoo. I thought we were friends. Am I mistaken, dear Annie?" She pretended to wipe tears from her eyes.

In desperation, I threw a book at her. It went right through her and broke the glass in my window.

Elsie pretended to be shocked. "Oh, my, that window will be hard to explain," she said, "but I suppose you'll blame me as usual. Not that anyone believes you. Your state of mind grows more precarious every day."

At that moment, my door flew open and Nurse O'Brien appeared. "What was that noise?"

"It was an accident," I said. "I thought there was a fly or something at the window and I tried to kill it with my book, but—"

By now the nurse was staring in shock at the broken glass on the floor. "Oh dear, oh dear," she said, "I don't understand. How could there be a fly in the winter?"

With a loud laugh, Elsie vanished into the night, and Nurse O'Brien stared at me. "How can you laugh about this?"

She left the room to fetch a handyman. He cleaned up the glass and covered the window with cardboard. "It'll be a bit cold in here," he said,

“but I can’t replace the glass until morning. Serves you right for busting it. A fly, my eye.”

Next, Dr. Benson arrived. Obviously annoyed, he dropped a snow-covered math book on my desk. “You are not to blame this on Elsie. You must learn to take responsibility for your actions.”

“I admit I threw a book at Elsie,” I told him. “She got me into trouble, and I was mad.”

“No,” he said. “You got yourself into trouble, and you threw the book at the window, possibly at your own reflection, but not at Elsie.”

He sighed and sat down in the rocking chair. “Mrs. Coakley complained about your rudeness at lunch. Miss Ellis reported an incident with tempera paint. Mr. French says you failed all your quizzes and then told him he was a bad teacher. After the wall incident, I expected better behavior today.”

“I’m sorry you won’t believe me. You have no idea what she’s like.”

“You’ll have dinner in your room tonight. Without you and your unpredictable outbursts, the others might enjoy their meal.”

He rose to his feet to leave, but paused at the door. “Please try to improve, Annie. You’re a young girl. I don’t want you to spend the rest of your childhood here.”

I watched the door close behind him. A cold stream of air slipped through the cardboard taped to my window. Elsie settled herself on the wardrobe. “Tsk, tsk. What a bad, bad girl you are, Annie Browne.”

I sat on my bed and silently hated her.

TWENTY

THE NEXT DAY, Mother and Father came for a visit. Dr. Benson was with them. From the looks on their faces, it was clear they'd heard about my behavior. I hoped they wouldn't notice the faint scribbles on the wall, but of course they did. Mother gasped and Father looked at me with sorrow.

"I didn't do it," I said.

Dr. Benson gestured to my parents to come closer. He spoke softly, but I heard him anyway. "All of this is due to Annie's guilt about Elsie. She'll need more treatment than I thought."

They nodded unhappily. Mother reached for Father's hand, and he clasped it tightly.

"Stop by and see me after visiting hours," Dr. Benson told them and left the three of us alone in my room.

Fortunately, the handyman had replaced the glass in my window before visiting hours, so I didn't need to explain why I'd thrown the book. But Father mentioned it anyway.

"Cedar Grove is billing us for the window you broke, as well as the paint for your room. Why on earth do you behave this way?"

"I don't remember," I lied. "I guess I was upset or something."

Father and Mother looked at each other with sorrowful faces.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't mean to make you unhappy. I just want to come home. I hate it here. Why can't you take me home? Don't you love me?" My voice rose like a child's. "Please take me home, please."

"Of course we love you." Mother embraced me. I smelled her perfume and shampoo, nice smells, familiar smells. I wanted to stay where I was forever. Surely I was safe from Elsie in her arms.

"Home isn't home without you," Father said, "but Dr. Benson is concerned about your state of mind. He insists you're not ready to leave Cedar Grove."

"If you'd just stop blaming Elsie," Mother added. "Neither your father nor I understand your obsession with her. You have nothing to feel guilty

about. No one blames you for not being friends with her."

Their voices flowed over me. They meant to comfort me, but they didn't understand. They had no idea. Nothing I said would help.

The subject changed to the weather. "Such a long, cold winter we've had," Mother said. "If only spring would come."

"*The Evening Sun* says it's the coldest winter on record," Father said.

"I believe it," Mother said.

When we ran out of things to say about the weather, Father told me the people next door had gotten a dog from the pound.

"He's a cute little mutt, but he barks all day and all night. It's driving me crazy."

Mother told me Dickie Simmons fell through the ice on the lake, but his big brother Bobby saved him. Jane's mother and father went to New York to see a play on Broadway. She ran into Miss Harrison at the grocery store. "She asked about you, Annie. She misses you and hopes you come home soon."

By the time the visit ended, I was exhausted. It was as if I'd been making polite conversation with friendly strangers. Maybe Dr. Benson had told them not to say anything that might agitate me. Or disturb my precarious state of mind.

At noon, I took my seat beside Mrs. Jameson in the dining room. Before I touched my soup, I spotted Elsie in a tree near the window, hurling snowballs at two men shoveling wind-blown snow from the sidewalks. She had a remarkably good aim. The men were obviously puzzled and angry, but saw no one to blame.

Mrs. Jameson touched my hand to get my attention. "What are you looking at, Annie?"

My whole body stiffened in alarm. "Nothing."

Mrs. Jameson continued to stare at the tree. "It's like the shadow in the library yesterday," she said. "I can't see what's causing it. Are you sure you don't see it?"

When I shook my head, she pointed directly at Elsie. "It's right there in those branches."

Elsie saw us looking and scowled. Like yesterday, she pressed her finger to her mouth and shook her head. With an agility she'd never had in real life, she jumped from the tree and ran across the snow toward the pond.

Losing sight of her among the trees, I turned to Mrs. Jameson.

"That's funny," she said. "The shadow's gone. It just floated away."

She picked up her spoon and began to eat her soup. "Too salty by half," she said, "but edible."

After lunch, Mrs. Jameson said, "We need to talk, Annie. Those shadows are bothering me. I believe you know more about them than you're saying."

"I can't talk now." I edged away from her. "I have homework to do."

She took my arm. "Come with me. It's important."

I let her lead me to the library. What did she think I knew? What did she suspect?

I chose a different couch with no window view. Perhaps Elsie wouldn't see us here.

"Something was in that tree," Mrs. Jameson said in a low voice. "A patch of darkness, vague, unformed. I couldn't make out what it was, but I know it was there." She paused and took my hand. "And I know it has something to do with you, Annie."

"No, you're wrong." I told her. "There was nothing in the tree except a crow. I was looking at a crow, that's all."

"There was no crow, Annie." She squeezed my hand. "Why won't you confide in me? Don't you trust me?"

No, I didn't trust Mrs. Jameson enough to tell her about Elsie. Look what happened when I tried to explain what I saw—I was called a liar, delusional, guilt ridden. Elsie was a figment of my imagination. She wasn't real.

If I told Mrs. Jameson a ghost had been sitting in the tree, throwing snowballs, she too would think I was crazy. I'd lose the only friend I'd made in Cedar Grove.

"Please tell me what's frightening you so."

I looked into her eyes and saw only sympathy. Taking a deep breath, I decided to take a chance. If one person, just one, believed me maybe I wouldn't feel so alone. "Do you believe in ghosts?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "Most definitely."

My heart beat faster. "Have you actually seen one?"

"This must be a secret between you and me," she said. "Promise not to tell Dr. Benson. He already thinks I'm delusional."

I crossed my heart and promised.

She paused, perhaps to think, before beginning. “I saw my first ghost when I was a small child—three or four years old at the most. My grandmother died before I was born, but she often visited me. She’d sit by my bed at night when I was afraid of the dark and sing lullabies to comfort me.”

“Did you tell your mother and father about her?”

“Oh, yes, several times. I even described the flowered dress she wore and her white hair, but they always dismissed it as a dream. As you already know, most people simply refuse to believe in ghosts.”

“Did you ever see a scary ghost?”

“When I was younger—not young like you, but younger than I am now—I stayed in haunted inns and hotels and wrote stories about my experiences. I published them in magazines that go for that sort of thing.”

She paused a moment as if she were remembering those days. “Usually the ghosts were sad and lonely. I found ways to help them leave this world and move on to a better place. A little nudge was all most of them needed.”

She frowned. “But once in a while, I encountered vengeful spirits who’d been wronged when they were alive. They were angry. They hungered to get even with their enemies but often ended up taking out their rage on any hapless mortal who crossed their path. Occasionally I helped them find peace, but the really troubled ones always resisted.”

“You must have been very brave.”

Mrs. Jameson laughed. “I must confess I once fled from a hotel in the middle of the night. I’d never felt such an evil presence. It was as if I were being suffocated. I feared for my sanity and maybe even my life.”

She readjusted her glasses on the bridge of her nose and said, “Tell me about your ghost, Annie.”

“Her name is Elsie Schneider,” I began. “She died of the flu last November. She wanted to be my friend while she was alive, but I didn’t like her. Now that she’s dead, she says I must be her friend, but I hate her more now than I did before she died. She’s ruined my whole life. Can you make her go away and leave me alone?”

“What was she like before she died?”

Starting with Elsie’s first visit to my house, I told Mrs. Jameson everything: how I became friends with Rosie and dropped Elsie, how we teased her in the park and stole her flu mask, how she died, how I crashed my sled into her grave and woke her up.

“Ever since then, she’s followed me everywhere I go,” I said. “She turned my friends against me, she made me say terrible things and do awful things. She’s jealous and angry and hateful. She wants everything I have, even my parents.”

I looked at Mrs. Jameson, desperate for her help. “Please tell me you can send her where she belongs.”

A noise drew our attention to a dark corner. Elsie stood there, barely visible in the shadows, watching Mrs. Jameson and me.

“She’s in that corner.” Mrs. Jameson clasped my hand. “I can’t see her, but I feel her. She’s angry, isn’t she?”

I drew closer to Mrs. Jameson. “She doesn’t want me to have any friend except her.”

“I sense that.” She continued to stare at Elsie. “I see her outline now,” she whispered.

Elsie’s face twisted into a grimace of hate. “You’ll be sorry, Annie!” With that, she disappeared.

“She’s gone, isn’t she?” Mrs. Jameson asked. “For a second I saw her as clearly as I see you, and then poof, she vanished like a magician’s trick.”

“Elsie’s good at disappearing, but she’s even better at reappearing.” I clung to Mrs. Jameson for a moment. “Don’t worry. We’ll both see her again.”

“Elsie’s a very troubled child. Angry and vengeful. I’ll do all I can to help you, but I’m not as strong as I once was. It may be more than I can do, Annie.”

“Please be careful,” I told her. “Elsie might try to hurt you.”

We walked to the door together. “Don’t worry about me, Annie. I’ve dealt with spirits worse than Elsie. After all, she’s just a little girl.”

I left Mrs. Jameson reluctantly. I was already late for arts and crafts, but instead of hurrying, I walked slowly, directing all my mental energy at Elsie. *Please please please, do not hurt Mrs. Jameson. Please please please, do not hurt Mrs. Jameson.* Over and over again, over and over again, I repeated my plea until the words ran together and made no sense.

TWENTY-ONE

I DIDN'T SEE ELSIE AGAIN until just before dinner. While I was combing my hair, she came through the window and sat on top of the wardrobe. The smirk on her face disturbed me. She'd either done something already or was about to do it. Whatever it was, it would bring me grief.

"Where have you been?" I asked her.

She shrugged and kicked the wardrobe door with her heels. "Oh, just out and about, fooling with this and that, nothing to write home about."

"You've done something. I can tell."

"Well, aren't you a clever girl?" She swung her heels so hard the wardrobe vibrated.

"Tell me."

"It's my secret, but don't worry—you'll find out soon enough." Elsie took a flying leap from the wardrobe and landed on my bed. She bounced a couple of times. "Just remember, it's your fault, Annie. If you'd do what I tell you, I'd be good all the time."

"If you've hurt Mrs. Jameson, I'll—"

"You'll what?" She laughed and vanished, leaving me even more worried than before. I drew my breath in and out, in and out, and struggled to control my fear. What had she done?

The dinner bell interrupted my thoughts. Filled with dread of what I might learn, I walked down the hall slowly. When I was close enough to hear voices and smell food, I stopped, closed my eyes tightly, and whispered, "Please let Mrs. Jameson be at the table, please let her be all right."

"What are you doing standing there with your eyes shut?" Nurse Baker bustled up to me and gave me a push through the door. "Take your seat at the table. Don't keep the others waiting."

The first thing I saw was Mrs. Jameson's empty chair. I sat down in my seat and watched the door. At any moment, I'd see her enter the dining room. She was late, that's all it was.

Elsie appeared at the window. Her smile revealed her crooked teeth, browner now than before. I sank into my seat. What had she done? Where was Mrs. Jameson?

Outside the window, Elsie laughed.

As the servers entered with trays of food, I leaned across the table and caught Miss Nelson's attention. She was a small, thin, nervous woman who seemed afraid of me and my strange outbursts, but she had a kind face.

"Excuse me, but do you know where Mrs. Jameson is?"

Miss Nelson blinked several times, but instead of answering, she turned to Mrs. Coakley, who looked at me as if I'd asked a rude question.

"I can't think *why* you would care," she said in a low voice, "but Mrs. Jameson is in the infirmary. She had a bad fall and broke her hip." Looking at me, she added, "Some people say she was *pushed*."

Without another word, she turned her attention to her dinner and began cutting her meat and vegetables into tiny pieces.

Miss Nelson leaned across the table, her eyes moist. "When you're her age and you break your hip, it's the beginning of the end. Mark my words, she'll be in bed the rest of her life."

Mrs. Coakley looked sharply at Miss Nelson. "Now, Edith, don't get yourself all het up."

My appetite gone, I left the table and ran out of the dining room. The other patients watched me go. *Annie Browne, the crazy girl. Better stay away from her. No telling what she'll do next. Throw something, bite you, insult you, stab you with her butter knife.*

Nurse Calloway caught up with me in the hall. "You haven't finished your dinner, Annie."

"Please, I don't feel well. May I go to my room?"

Nurse Baker would have sent me back to the dining room, but Nurse Calloway said, "Yes, of course, Annie. I hope you feel better in the morning. If you want soup, I can send it to your room."

"Thank you, but I'm not hungry."

I trudged down the hall. Elsie had made Mrs. Jameson fall. There was no doubt in my mind. That was her secret. That was what she'd gloated about. She'd hurt the only person who believed me, the only one who might help me.

I sat on my bed and wrapped myself in an afghan Mother had crocheted for me. The clock on my bureau ticked, each second loud in the silence. The

wind pounded on my window, and the trees bowed and bent as it passed through their branches.

I pictured Mrs. Jameson in the infirmary, listening to the same wind I heard. I hoped she wasn't in pain. Perhaps Mrs. Coakley was wrong about the fall. Maybe Mrs. Jameson was just bruised, and she'd be at breakfast or lunch tomorrow, and we'd go to the library and make plans.

A creaking noise drew my attention to the rocking chair. Elsie sat there, grinning.

I flung myself at her in fury. The rocking chair crashed to the floor, taking me with it, but Elsie slipped out of my hands and perched on the curtain rod safely out of my reach.

"How could you do it?" I screamed. "She never harmed you."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I swear you get crazier every day, Annie Browne. They'll be taking you to the lunatic asylum any day now. I hear they have a nice padded cell and a straitjacket all ready for you."

"Don't lie to me. You know exactly what I'm talking about. Mrs. Jameson is in the infirmary with a broken hip because you made her fall down the steps."

"Oh, that old lady." Elsie shrugged to show she couldn't care less about Mrs. Jameson. "It's your fault she fell, not mine. I warned you not to make friends with anyone. We don't need an old biddy coming between us, so I took care of her."

In a rage, I lunged at the curtains and tried to pull her down, but Elsie scurried to the top of the wardrobe before I could catch her.

She laughed. "You can't catch me, I'm the gingerbread man."

I stood there panting in frustration, my fists clenched. "I hate you, I despise you, I abhor you, I detest you," I shouted. "I'd kill you all over again if I could!"

Elsie sneered. "You'd better watch what you say to me, or I'll make it look like *you* pushed Mrs. Jameson down the steps. I can do that, you know."

I collapsed on my bed. If Dr. Benson believed I'd pushed Mrs. Jameson, they'd take me away in a straitjacket. Elsie would make sure I stayed there for the rest of my life.

"Well?" Elsie asked. "Are we friends now? Or must I make it look like you pushed the old lady, your so-called friend, down the steps?"

I forced myself to stare into her eyes. Death itself must look like Elsie, I thought. “Friends,” I repeated. “You don’t know how to be friends.”

Elsie bared her crooked teeth like a dog about to bite. “How am I supposed to know? I never had a friend, remember? You should be good at it—but you’re worse than I am. Look at the way you’ve treated me.”

She paused to push her tangled hair out of her face. “You were my friend for a few days, but I got sick and Rosie turned you against me. And then you and your new friends ganged up on me in the park and Rosie stole my flu mask. And then I died! Not you. Not Rosie or any of those other girls. None of *you* died. Just me. *Me,* poor Elsie Schneider, the girl nobody liked. Couldn’t you at least be sorry?”

“How many times must tell you? I’m sorry you died. There—does that satisfy you?”

“The only reason you’re sorry,” Elsie said, “is because you’re stuck with me. I wouldn’t be here if you’d treated me better.”

“Oh, why can’t you understand?” I clenched my fists to keep from slapping her. “You don’t belong here anymore. You’re dead, Elsie! You’re dead, dead, DEAD!”

The walls rang with my words, which echoed and bounced like hard rubber balls caroming from chairs to tables to bureaus. *Dead, dead, DEAD. Dead, dead, DEAD.* I covered my ears, but the word rang in my head. *Dead, dead, DEAD!*

I shut my eyes and waited for Elsie to say something. To scream at me. To throw things. After a few moments of total silence, I opened my eyes, but I didn’t see her. “Are you still here?”

In a cold voice from the top of the wardrobe, Elsie said, “Of course, I’m still here. Where else would I be?”

In your grave like a normal dead person, I thought.

I got into bed and turned my back on her. I wanted to go home. I wanted my life back—the way it was before the park, before the viewing, before my sled ride in the cemetery.

But most of all, I wanted to be rid of Elsie.

TWENTY-TWO

DAYS PASSED WITH NO WORD from Mrs. Jameson. I heard Mrs. Coakley tell Miss Nelson she was doing poorly and might be transferred to a nursing home. I asked Dr. Benson about her, but he simply said she was doing as well as expected. Whatever that meant.

Elsie had her own stories about Mrs. Jameson. "I went to the infirmary," she told me. "I saw that old lady who fell down the steps. She's going to die, Annie, I'm certain of it."

I told myself not to believe anything Elsie said. She was a liar, I knew that. But I was scared she might do something to make Mrs. Jameson worse.

After a week of misery, fear, and worry, I was finally allowed to visit Mrs. Jameson. At the door to the infirmary, Nurse Ryan stopped me.

"I can't allow you to stay more than fifteen minutes," she told me. "Mrs. Jameson is still weak and tires easily. She had a very bad fall, you know. It's a miracle she's still with us."

She studied my face for a moment. "She's quite fond of you, Annie." As she spoke, her own face looked puzzled, as if she couldn't imagine why Mrs. Jameson took any interest in a crazy girl like me. "She'll be happy to see you."

As quietly as possible, I followed the nurse down a narrow corridor between two rows of beds. The people were all old. Most of them were asleep, but a few raised their heads to watch me go by. I tried to smile at them, but they scared me. They were small and thin, like children old before their time. They looked as if they were waiting for something to happen, but they didn't know if it would be good or bad.

Mrs. Jameson was asleep in the last bed in the row. I didn't want to wake her, so I sat quietly in a wooden chair beside her. She breathed loudly, as if it took all her strength to inhale and exhale.

What if Miss Nelson was right? What if Mrs. Jameson never got out of that bed? Worse yet, what if Elsie was right and Mrs. Jameson died? My

chest tightened with sorrow, which soon turned to anger.

Elsie had done this; she'd put Mrs. Jameson in this bed. She was a cruel and hateful spirit. We had to get rid of her.

I felt a touch on my hand and looked up to see Mrs. Jameson smiling at me. "Oh, it's good to see you, Annie. I've been so worried about you." Her voice was so low, I had to lean close to hear her.

"I'm so sorry Elsie made you fall."

"Please don't blame yourself, Annie. It's not your fault."

"Yes, it is. If I'd been her friend while she was alive, maybe she'd be in her grave where she belongs."

Mrs. Jameson gazed at me in silence. Finally she said, "Suppose you try to be her friend now?"

I stared at her in disbelief. "I hate her! How can I be her friend? After all the horrible things she's done?"

"It won't be easy, but it might help Elsie move on and leave you in peace." She patted my hand. "Surely it's worth a try."

I closed my eyes for a moment and tried to calm down. The very idea repulsed me, but if it was the only way to rid myself of Elsie, I'd make myself do it. After all, Mrs. Jameson knew more about ghosts than I did.

I sniffed and blew my nose. "I'll try."

"Good girl." She smiled and squeezed my hand. "Come back tomorrow and tell me what happens."

Nurse Ryan tapped my shoulder. "Let her rest now. She's tired."

I leaned over and kissed Mrs. Jameson's cheek, but her eyes had already closed.

Before I left the infirmary, I looked at the nurse. "She's getting better, isn't she?"

Nurse Ryan began to go through a pile of paper on her desk. "Run along, Annie. Can't you see I have work to do?"

She hadn't answered my question, but it was probably because she was busy. I lingered a moment, just in case she had something else to say, but she kept her head down and ignored me.

I walked slowly back to my room, trying not to worry about Mrs. Jameson. It took older people longer to get well. I'd heard my mother say that when Grandmother was sick. She'd be all right in a few days, maybe a week.

What I needed to do now was take her advice. Maybe if I were Elsie's friend just for a little while, she'd be happy and go wherever dead people went. Then my life would return to normal—though, honestly, I wasn't sure I remembered normal.

Elsie met me in the doorway of my room. She'd pulled the covers off my bed and torn up the homework I'd spent hours doing.

"You went to see that crazy old lady, didn't you?"

"She's not crazy—"

"Crazy or not, I can make her have another accident, you know."

"No, please don't hurt her again. She's on your side. She wants us to be friends."

"I bet she does."

"Honestly, Elsie. She has a lot of sympathy for you."

"Ha." Elsie scowled in disbelief. "You're such a liar."

"I'm not lying. She wants me to be your friend. She wants me to make up for the way I treated you."

"That might be what *she* wants, but what about you, Annie?" She stared at me through narrowed eyes. "What do *you* want?"

"It's what I want, too. Mrs. Jameson convinced me I owe it to you."

"You better mean it, Annie Browne. If you're lying, I'll find out."

Doing my best to speak in a steady, truthful voice, I said, "Cross my heart and hope to die, if I ever tell a lie."

"So," she said. "Will we be bosom buddies just like girls in books?"

"Yes, of course, Elsie. Whatever you say."

"Best friends for all eternity. You and me. Just the two of us."

"Yes, yes, just you and me. Best friends for all eternity." I had to struggle not to choke on *eternity.*

Elsie smiled. "I'm glad you finally see things my way." She looked around the room. "I'm sorry I tore up your homework. You'll have to do it over again, I guess. I'd do it for you, but I don't remember how to do math anymore."

As she tidied up my room, I opened my math book and redid my homework. I hoped my promise would protect Mrs. Jameson, but I wasn't sure I'd be rid of Elsie anytime soon. *Best friends for all eternity*—those words made me fear she meant to be around for a long time.

From then on, I visited Mrs. Jameson whenever I could. Elsie often followed me and watched from the door. She didn't like my spending so much time with Mrs. Jameson, but as long as I was nice to her, she had no reason to make a scene.

Sometimes I'd find Mrs. Jameson propped up on pillows, either crocheting or reading *The Pickwick Papers,* one of the few Dickens novels she hadn't read. Often she was asleep, and I'd sit beside her and wait for her to wake up. She still breathed heavily, and she'd developed a bad cough.

She always asked about Elsie. "Is she happier?"

"I guess so," I'd say. "At least she's stopped getting me into trouble."

"And how do you feel?"

"Not too bad, but I hope she leaves soon. It's hard to pretend to like her."

"Well, keep on pretending, Annie. Your efforts will be rewarded, I'm sure."

Before I left, she asked me to read *The Pickwick Papers* to her. Her eyes were weak, she said, and it tired her to read. We both laughed at Mr. Pickwick's antics. He was such a silly man, but sweet and charming. We couldn't help liking him even when he made mistakes.

That afternoon, Dr. Benson said, "You've had no bad reports this week, not even from Nurse Baker. You're doing well in your calisthenics class. Miss Hyde tells me you've improved your strength and can do twenty or so sit-ups now. You've been well behaved in arts and crafts. Mr. French is pleased that your schoolwork has improved. The staff feels you're finally learning to control your behavior."

He smiled at me. "If you continue like this, Annie, you might be allowed to go home in a few weeks."

I skipped all the way to my room. Home. I'd soon go home!

Elsie looked up when I opened the door. She was sitting on the carpet playing with a set of paper dolls. Although I seldom played with paper dolls, Elsie had begged me to ask Mother to bring some. She had never had any of her own. She played with them for hours, drawing clothes and making up stories about them—which I never heard because she whispered them to herself. I had a feeling I didn't want to know the plots.

"Guess what?" I asked. "Dr. Benson says I can go home soon."

Elsie clapped her hands. "Oh, Annie, how wonderful! We'll have so much fun at your house."

I clenched my teeth to keep from saying, *No, no, you aren't coming with me,* you're going wherever dead people go. But I knew better. A response like that would enrage Elsie. So, forcing myself to smile, I pretended to be as happy as she was.

"Just me and you," Elsie went on. "We'll go everywhere together. We'll share everything. We won't need anyone else."

"But sometimes I might go to Jane's house to play—"

"No you won't," Elsie interrupted. "What do you need Jane for? *I'm* your friend, your only friend, your best friend, your *true* friend." She scowled at me. "And you better not forget it!"

No, I wouldn't forget. How could I? She'd be with me every day and every night, watching me, making sure I had no friends but her.

"It's Rosie's fault we weren't friends before I died," Elsie said. "She turned everyone against me, including you. She stole my flu mask because she wanted me to die. I know it for a fact."

"Can't you just forget what Rosie said and did? You bring it up over and over again. Honestly, I'm tired of hearing it. We're friends now."

Elsie scowled. "I never forget anything." Snatching up my favorite paper doll, she glared at its smiling face and red hair. "This one looks like Rosie. Don't you hate her?" Giving me a sly look, she ripped the doll's head off.

I tried to rescue the poor thing, but Elsie wadded the two pieces into a ball and threw it across the room. I watched it roll under the wardrobe.

Elsie moved closer to me. When she opened her mouth to speak, I noticed that two or three of her teeth had fallen out. She was changing. Her skin had gotten dry and flaky, and her hair hung in tangled knots. I backed away from her, but she scooted across the carpet, keeping as close to me as possible.

"Listen, Annie. I'm getting even with Rosie, just you wait. And the others too." She gathered up all the paper dolls and decapitated them one by one. Mother, father, sister, brother, and baby, all drifted to the floor. Heads here, bodies there. It was a massacre. "They'll all be sorry they were mean to me."

While I sat there speechless, Elsie went on, "You and I will give Rosie a taste of her own medicine. I've got it all planned. We'll get some rat poison and put it in her lemonade. She'll drink it and—ha ha—that's the end of her."

"You can't do something like that!"

“Oh, yes, I can. And you’re going to help me!”

“You must be insane—I’ll never help you do something that horrible to my friend!”

“You’re *my* friend now, not Rosie’s. Of course you’ll help me.” She grinned, and another tooth fell out of her mouth. It landed on the carpet among the headless paper dolls. She scooped it up and slipped it into her pocket as if nothing had happened.

“I won’t—you can’t make me!”

“Ha. I can make you do anything I want. You’ll see!” Elsie laughed and darted out the door. I hurried after her, but she’d already disappeared.

Fearing she might be on her way to Mrs. Jameson, I ran to the infirmary.

When she saw me, Nurse Ryan frowned. “You again,” she said. “Fifteen minutes, no more.”

Mrs. Jameson was propped up on pillows, looking out the window beside her bed.

She smiled when she saw me and beckoned me closer. “Spring is coming at last,” she said. “The edges of the trees are softening, and I see hints of green and yellow and pink in their branches.”

I pressed my face against the glass so I could see the ground beneath the window. “The snow is melting and the daffodils are blooming in the garden,” I told her.

“My favorite flowers,” she said. “I love their frilly little bonnets.”

I sat in the chair by the bed and held her hand. “How do you feel today?”

“Oh, about the same.” She coughed, and I filled a glass of water for her.

After taking a few sips, she said, “I’ve been thinking about you and Elsie. Has anything changed?”

“For the worse,” I said, “not the better. When Dr. Benson sends me home, she means to come with me. I’m supposed to help her poison Rosie. She can’t make me do something like that, can she?”

Mrs. Jameson looked at me huddled in the chair, probably a picture of misery. “Of course not. No one can make you do something you don’t want to do.”

“That’s what *she* thinks.” On silent feet, Elsie had appeared beside me.

“What are you doing here?” I whispered.

“I don’t trust you, Annie. You’re plotting against me.”

Mrs. Jameson looked straight at Elsie. “That’s not true. We want to help you. Poor child, you’re so unhappy.”

“Stop staring at me,” Elsie said. “You can’t see me. You can’t hear me either. No one can, unless I want them to.”

“I can both see and hear you,” Mrs. Jameson said. “You’re standing right there beside Annie.”

“Liar,” Elsie said. “I bet you can’t tell me what I look like.”

“You’re wearing a ragged blue dress with a lace collar and a pale blue sash,” Mrs. Jameson said. “You have no shoes or socks. Your hair is long and blond and in need of a good combing. Your face is pale and very sad.”

“I’m not sad—don’t you dare say I am. I have a friend now, and I’m going to get my way and do what I want and have fun.” Elsie glared at Mrs. Jameson. “And you can’t stop me!”

“You’re angry now, aren’t you?”

“You’d make anybody angry, you crazy old lady.”

“Come sit beside me, Elsie. Let me comfort you.” Mrs. Jameson stretched out her arms as if to embrace Elsie.

Quick as a cat, Elsie moved out of her reach. “You want to send me back to my grave, *that’s* what you want to do, but I don’t like it there. I’m staying here with Annie. I have plans. And she’s helping me whether she likes it or not.”

“Those plans won’t make you happy, Elsie.”

“If you don’t leave me alone, I’ll make something worse happen to you!”

Elsie disappeared as quickly and quietly as she’d appeared, but a chill remained in the room, and her words rang in my head.

I turned to Mrs. Jameson in despair. “Tell me what to do.”

She reached for my hand. “Be kind to her, earn her trust. I’ll help you if I’m able.”

I stroked her hands. They were thinner now, and the veins stuck out in knotted blue ropes. “When you’re well and strong,” I told her, “you’ll think of something.”

She sighed. “When I was younger, I’d have made her listen, I’d have won her trust, but I failed to reach her.” She lay back against her pillows. “Oh, Annie, that poor child doesn’t know what she wants or where to go. I feel so useless.”When she began coughing again, I helped her sip from the glass of water. Her eyes were far away, and her face was as sad as Elsie’s.

After she’d drunk what she wanted, I put the glass on the table by her bed. “Do you want me to read to you?”

She closed her eyes. “I’m a bit tired, Annie. I’d probably fall asleep before you read the first sentence.”

I sat beside her and watched her go to sleep. “Please get well,” I whispered and kissed her forehead. Her skin was warm, and her face was flushed. She probably had a fever. And a bad cough. Maybe she had bronchitis. I’d had it several times when I was little, and I remembered the fever and the terrible cough. Another week or two, and she’d be fine.

Nurse Ryan tapped my shoulder. “Time’s up, Annie.”

At the infirmary door, I wanted to ask Nurse Ryan if Mrs. Jameson had bronchitis, but she’d already started going through the endless piles of paper on her desk. I left without bothering her. What was the use? She wouldn’t tell me anything.

TWENTY-THREE

ELSIE POUNCED ON ME from a shadowy corner in the hall.

"Blabbermouth," she said. "You promised not to tell that old lady about me."

"I didn't have to tell her—she saw you, Elsie."

"No, she didn't. She tricked me, and you helped her. What kind of friend are you?"

"Why won't you believe me? Mrs. Jameson sees ghosts. She has a gift."

"Some gift."

"She wants to help you, Elsie."

"She wants to help *you,* not me, but she can't make me go anywhere, and neither can you. I'm staying right here!"

With that, Elsie darted away. Behind me, Nurse Ryan called, "Who are you talking to, Annie?"

"Nobody!" Turning my back on her, I ran down the steps.

Before going to my room, I stopped in the library to look for a book. I hadn't been there five minutes before Elsie joined me.

"Find something good," she said. "I want you to read to me like you read to that old lady."

"Read to yourself," I muttered. "You don't need me to do it."

"Words don't make sense anymore," she said. "The letters turn into squiggles and fall off the pages. It's a good thing I don't have to go to school."

She sounded so sad, I almost felt sorry for her. "What do you want me to read?"

"I don't know." She ran her finger lightly up and down the spines of the books. "Are there any stories about graveyards and dead people and what happens to them after they're buried?"

Startled by her choice of subject, I shook my head.

"How about ghosts? You must know some ghost stories." Her eyes mocked me. "Maybe you don't like ghosts. Maybe they scare you."

She laughed and swept along the shelves, picking books at random and throwing them on the floor. I scurried behind her, picking them up almost as fast as she threw them down.

"Stop it," I begged. "You'll get me into trouble."

She threw *The Pickwick Papers* at me. "Look what I found. The same book you're reading to that old lady. I want you to read it to me!"

The book flew at my face, its pages flapping like a bird's wings. I ducked, and it thudded to the floor just as the librarian poked her head around the shelves to see what was going on.

"What was that noise?" she asked me. "How did this book get on the floor?"

I scooped up *The Pickwick Papers.* "I'm sorry," I stammered. "I dropped it."

She looked suspicious, but she checked the book out for me. "It's due in two weeks, Annie. Make sure you return it in good condition."

I thanked her and left the library.

"That was a close call." Elsie reappeared in the hall. "I was hoping you'd get in trouble again."

Once we were in the safety of my room, Elsie insisted I read the first chapter of *The Pickwick Papers*.

"I don't think you'll like it," I told her.

"If you and that old lady like it, why wouldn't I like it?"

"It's just that it's kind of old-fashioned in the beginning. It gets better, but __"

Elsie opened the book to the first page. "Read it. If I don't like it, I'll tell you."

I cleared my throat and began to read chapter one:

> The first ray of light which illumines the gloom, and converts into a dazzling brilliancy that obscurity in which the earlier history of the public career of the immortal Pickwick would appear to be involved —

Before I'd reached the end of the first paragraph, Elsie snatched the book away and looked at the page in disbelief.

"What's this story about? It doesn't make sense."

"Well, it's about Mr. Pickwick and his friends. They belong to a club, and they travel around and do funny things."

"You and the old lady like this book? You think it's funny?"

"I told you it's old-fashioned. You have to be patient."

Elsie threw the book across the room. For a moment, I feared it would go through the window, but this time it landed on the floor.

"You don't want me to keep reading?"

"No. That book bores me to death." She laughed. With her mouth wide open, I saw she'd lost another tooth. "*Bores me to death*—that's a good joke. You bore me to death, too. So does that old lady and everybody else in this place. I can't wait to go to your house and have fun."

The next day, my parents came to visit. From the top of the wardrobe, Elsie watched me run to Mother. Elsie had an odd expression on her face—some anger, some envy, some sorrow, all mixed up together.

"You look so pretty today," I told Mother. "I love that blue sweater. Your pearls go so well with it." I looked over her shoulder at Elsie and sent a message from my mind to hers. *She's my mother, not yours. She loves me, not you.*

"Why, thank you, Annie." Mother hugged me.

The wardrobe creaked. Elsie sighed and sent a stream of cold air across the room. Mother shivered.

"Your room's an icebox," she said. "It's warmer outside than it is in here."

I grabbed her hand. "Let's go for a walk. It's too nice to stay inside."

Father smiled. "What a good idea, Annie. I saw the first daffodils this morning."

Mother kept my hand in hers, and Father took my other hand. Linked, we walked out of the building. I glanced behind us. Elsie followed, smiling as if she had a secret.

"Oh, no." Mother came to a stop and stared at the garden. "Who would do something so dreadful?"

Feeling sick, I looked at the daffodils. All of their pretty yellow heads lay scattered in the dirt. I was glad Mrs. Jameson wasn't there to see it.

I glanced at Elsie. She made scissor motions with her fingers. "Snip snip—off with their heads."

"What did you say, Annie?" Father asked.

“Nothing.”

He looked at me, but Mother hadn’t heard Elsie. She was down on her knees gathering the flower heads as if she thought she could stick them back on their stalks.

Father spoke to me in a low voice. “I could have sworn you made some sort of joke.”

“I don’t know what you heard, but you’re wrong,” I told him. “I’m as sad about the daffodils as you and Mother. I can’t imagine a person in their right mind doing something like this.”

I looked behind him. Elsie stuck out her tongue and swung on a tree limb. “*I’m* not the crazy one,” she said.

With a sigh, Father bent down to help Mother to her feet. “There’s nothing you can do about the daffodils, Ida.”

She held up a handful of flowers. “I can at least take these to the office and show them to the director. Perhaps he’ll find the culprit.”

Elsie sniggered, and Father looked at me again. “Did I hear you laugh?”

I tried my best not to look as hurt as I felt. “No, Father. There’s nothing funny about dead flowers.”

He looked at me, his eyes full of doubt, and turned away. Neither he nor Mother took my hand. I walked behind them with Elsie at my heels, snipping at my hair with imaginary scissors.

“They don’t love you anymore,” she whispered. “I go to your house at night when they’re in bed, and I listen to what they say. They want Dr. Benson to send you to the loony bin.”

I pressed my fingers into my ears. “Liar!”

Mother looked back, her face alarmed, but Father took her arm and whispered something to her.

“See?” Elsie said. “He’s telling her it’s just another one of your insane outbursts. They’re so tired of dealing with your craziness. The loony bin’s the place for you, Annie Browne.”

I hurried to catch up with my parents, but they walked on as if they’d forgotten I was there. Elsie stuck to my side.

“They think *you* killed the flowers,” she said. “That’s why they’re going to see the director. They intend to tell him you destroyed the garden. And then—poof! Off to the loony bin!”

It wasn’t true. My parents loved me. They’d never send me to an insane asylum. *Liar, liar, liar,* I muttered in a voice too low for anyone to hear.

In the office, Mother showed the ruined flowers to Mr. Owens, the director. “Whoever did this should be disciplined.”

“Is every flower cut?” he asked.

“Yes,” Father said. “Someone destroyed the garden.”

Mr. Owens watched Mother drop the flowers on his desk. “Could it be the work of an animal?” he asked. “A groundhog perhaps?”

“I don’t think so,” Father said.

“Absolutely not,” Mother said at the same time.

“Well,” Mr. Owens said, “thank you for telling me. I’ll look into the matter. We spend quite a bit to keep our grounds beautiful.”

After we left the office, I grabbed Father’s hand. “I didn’t ruin the garden,” I told him. “I didn’t!”

Mother and Father looked at me in surprise. “Of course you didn’t,” Father said. “Whoever said you did?”

“It was—” I stopped myself just in time. If I blamed Elsie, they’d be certain I’d done it. “It was the way the director looked at me. Didn’t you notice?”

Mother hugged me. “Please don’t worry about it, darling.”

I held her tightly. “Do you still love me?”

“Of course I do.”

“And Father, do you?”

He held my shoulders and looked into my eyes. “Annie, where do you get these notions? We both love you very much, and we’re longing for you to come home.”

From the shadows, Elsie taunted me. “They’re lying. They don’t love you. They don’t want you to come home.”

I put my fingers in my ears to deafen myself, but I heard her anyway. Her lies were in my head. Her words circled endlessly, full of hatred, tormenting me.

Father put his arm around my shoulders. “I know you don’t like it here, but soon you’ll be home and all of this will be forgotten.”

Mother wiped my eyes with her handkerchief. “Don’t cry, darling. We’ll be back tomorrow.”

I watched them walk away. *No, Father,* I thought, *this will never be forgotten.*

When I returned to my room, Elsie was waiting for me. “Why did you destroy the daffodils?”

She shrugged. “It was fun snip-snip-snipping their heads off.”

“No. You did it to hurt Mrs. Jameson.”

“Oh, boo-hoo-hoo,” Elsie wept. “Bad me. I killed the old lady’s favorite flowers. Their dear little frilly bonnets are scattered all over the grass. That’s just so, so sad.”

With a laugh, Elsie ducked away from me and settled herself in the rocking chair. “The old lady’s trying to take you away from me. But I won’t let her. If she’s not careful, she’ll fall out of bed and crack her head.”

“Please don’t hurt her.”

Elsie narrowed her eyes and examined my face. “Who do you like most, me or that old lady? Don’t lie. I’ll know if you do.”

I forced myself not to turn my head away. “I like you both the same.”

“What if you were in a boat going down the river and it started to sink and you could only save one of us? Would you choose me or her?”

“You’re already dead.”

“No, this is pretend. I’m alive, and so is she. Which one, Annie? Which one? Me or her?”

“You, Elsie,” I lied. “I’d choose you.”

She rocked back and forth so fast her edges blurred. “You’re lying,” she said.

“No, no, I’d never lie to you. Friends always tell each other the truth.”

Elsie stopped rocking and sighed. “Why did that old lady say I looked sad? Do you think I do?”

“Sometimes.”

Elsie smoothed the skirt of her dress over her bony knees. “Are you sad sometimes?”

“Yes. Everybody is.”

“Even Rosie?”

“Even Rosie.”

She began rocking again, slowly this time. My room was so quiet I heard the woman in the room next to mine cough. Someone walked past my door. The floor overhead creaked.

I came a little closer. “What are you sad about, Elsie?”

“I have lots to be sad about,” she said. “Much more than either you or Rosie or anyone else. For one thing, I’m dead, which isn’t much fun, if you really want to know. For another, you aren’t really my friend. I’m not as

smart as I used to be, but I know you hate me. You hated me when I was alive, and you hate me even more now!"

Her voice was rising and I knew she was getting angry, so I tried to tell her it wasn't true, I was her friend, but she kept yelling.

"Here's the saddest thing of all. My mother is dead. But your mother is alive, Rosie's mother is alive, Lucy, Jane, Eunice—every one of you have mothers who love you. But not me!"

She began to rock so fast I expected the chair to fall over backward or break into pieces. Her tangled hair flew around her face, her bony hands gripped the chair's arms. In a moment, her mood had changed from sorrow to rage.

"I hate you, Annie!" she screamed. "I don't want to be your friend after all."

"Fine," I yelled. "I don't want to be your friend."

"You won't be that old lady's friend either. I'll see to that."

She jumped from the rocking chair and ran toward my door. I tried to stop her, but she blocked my path.

"Get out of my way, Elsie!"

"Why? So you can tell that old lady to watch out—horrible, evil, wicked Elsie is coming?"

"Don't you dare hurt her."

"How will you stop me?"

I pushed her so hard my hands went right through her, and I fell on my face.

Elsie laughed. "When will you ever learn, Annie?"

I scrambled to my feet, but she'd disappeared. Afraid of what she might do, I ran up three flights of stairs to warn Mrs. Jameson. By the time I reached the infirmary, I was so out of breath I could hardly talk.

Nurse Ryan frowned at me. "What brings you back again?"

"Please, just let me see Mrs. Jameson. I won't disturb her, I promise."

She fidgeted with the papers on her desk. "She's taken a turn for the worse, Annie. It's pneumonia. She—"

"Please," I begged. "Please. I promise I won't stay long. I just want to see her."

"One noise, and out you go. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

I followed Nurse Ryan past the rows of beds where the others slept and sighed and dreamed. Someone had put a curtain around Mrs. Jameson's bed. In the glow of a lamp behind it, I made out the figure of a nurse sitting beside the bed.

I tiptoed closer and looked down at my friend. Her eyes were closed, and her breathing was loud and raspy. Her face was almost as white as the sheet on her bed. I touched her hand gently, and she opened her eyes.

"Annie," she whispered. "What's wrong? Has Elsie—"

The nurse seated beside her leaned over Mrs. Jameson. "Is this girl bothering you? I'll send her away if you wish."

"Oh, no, don't send Annie away. She's very dear to me." Mrs. Jameson's hand closed on mine as if to keep me by her side. "Could you please leave us for a while? We have important matters to discuss."

The nurse looked at me uncertainly. It was clear she didn't want to leave me alone with her patient.

"Please," Mrs. Jameson repeated. "Just a few minutes?"

The nurse rose to her feet. "I'll be at the desk with Nurse Ryan," she said. "If you need us, ring the bell beside your bed."

When she was gone, I gave Mrs. Jameson a sip of water. "Nurse Ryan says you have pneumonia, but you'll be better soon, won't you?"

"I hope so. We have many more Pickwickian adventures to share, you and I." She sighed. "And Elsie is still with us."

"She's very angry with you. I'm scared she might try to hurt you again."

"Do you know that Elsie visits me sometimes late at night when she thinks I'm asleep? If she means to harm me, she'd have done so by now."

"Elsie never said a word about it," I said. "Why does she come? What does she want?"

"I'm not sure. She sits by me, where you are now, and watches me. I keep my eyes shut and pretend to be asleep. Sometimes she talks, but she keeps her voice so low I can't hear more than a word or two of what she says."

She paused to take another drink. "She sounds sad, not angry or hateful. It's as if there's another Elsie hiding inside the one we see. That's the Elsie you must find, Annie."

"Just before I came to see you, Elsie told me she has a lot to be sad about. As you said, she didn't sound like herself at all. It was so strange."

"What did she tell you?"

I took a deep breath. “Well, she doesn’t like being dead. She knows I’ll never really be her friend. But most of all, she’s sad because her mother’s dead. Then she got really mad and disappeared. I was scared she’d come up here and push you out of bed.”

“In my younger days, I helped two or three restless spirits reunite with their deceased loved ones. Perhaps when I recover my strength . . .” Mrs. Jameson’s eyes drooped. “I’m sorry, Annie, I must rest. I hope we can talk more tomorrow.”

I leaned over Mrs. Jameson and kissed her. “I’ll be here.”

“In the meantime, remember to find Elsie’s hidden self. The longer she stays here, the more wicked and dangerous she’ll become.”

She patted my cheek and closed her eyes. I stood beside her and watched her fall into a deep sleep. Her breathing was fast and shallow, but she looked peaceful. “Please get well soon,” I whispered.

On silent feet, Nurse Ryan came up behind me and touched my shoulder. “Say good night, Annie.”

“Good night,” I said softly.

At the door, I asked Nurse Ryan if I could come back tomorrow.

“We’ll see.” She took her seat and the other nurse returned to her vigil at Mrs. Jameson’s bedside.

I met Elsie on the stairs. “She’s going to die, Annie. You must know that,” she said.

I ran past her. “I’m not listening to you.”

Behind me, Elsie’s laughter echoed in the stairwell.

TWENTY-FOUR

LATE THAT NIGHT, I woke up shivering with cold. My blanket lay on the floor. Elsie was gone. She'd left the window wide open, as if she planned to freeze me to death.

I got up to close the window and saw her dancing on the lawn. The rags of her dress fluttered, and her hair whipped around her face. The moon lit her brightly, but she cast no shadow.

Suddenly she turned to the window as if she'd sensed I was watching. "Annie," she sang, "come out to play, the moon doth shine as bright as day."

I leaned out the window. "Go away. We aren't friends anymore. Remember?"

"Come with a whoop, come with a call," she sang. "Come with a good will or not at all."

I wanted to slam the window shut and get back into bed, but what good would that do? There was no way to lock Elsie out. If I didn't go to her, she'd come to me and sing nursery rhymes all night.

She spun in circles. "You find milk and I'll find flour, and we'll have pudding in half an hour."

I watched her whirl across the grass, her arms spread, lifting into the air like a bird and swooping down to earth again. What if she wanted to say goodbye and disappear forever?

With that hope in mind, I pulled on my robe and slippers and climbed out my window. The wind felt more like winter than spring, and the grass was damp with rain from yesterday. In places, water squelched under my feet, and my slippers were soon soaked.

Elsie waited beside the pond. All her teeth were gone now. Her hair was matted with dirt. Her dress hung from her in filthy tatters. Her eyes had sunk farther into her skull, and her skin was mottled like the blotches on dead trees.

"What do you want?"

Elsie twisted a strand of hair around her finger. I was shocked to see it fall from her hand to the ground. It lay in the grass like a coil of fine-spun string. We both looked at it, but neither of us picked it up.

"Something's happening to me," Elsie said. "My hair, my teeth, my skin. I don't belong here anymore, but I don't know where I'm supposed to go. The old lady said she can help me. Do you believe her?"

"Yes."

We faced each other, Elsie and I, alone in the moonlight. She tipped her head back and looked at the stars. The Milky Way, the Big Dipper, Cassiopeia's Chair, Orion the Hunter, sprawled across the blackness. They'd been there forever, those constellations, longer than they'd had names. Long before we were born, they'd been there, and long after we died, they'd be there.

Elsie continued to stare at the sky. "Do you trust her?"

"Yes."

"What if she sends me back to my coffin to lie in the dark forever? Maybe she'll cut my head off and stuff my mouth with garlic. Maybe she'll drive a stake through my heart. Maybe she'll burn me to ashes."

"Mrs. Jameson wouldn't do any of those things. You're not a vampire or a revenant."

"She might think I am. The way you blab about me and how awful I am." Imitating what she thought I sounded like, she whined, "Oh, see what Elsie made me do. It wasn't me, it was Elsie, horrible Elsie, evil Elsie, wicked Elsie."

The sad Elsie was gone, and the angry Elsie was back. Spying a garden she'd missed, she ran about snatching the flower heads off their stems and scattering them in the grass.

I ran after her, trying to stop her, but when I grabbed her, she wasn't there—she was somewhere else, laughing at me. Frantic, desperate, she ran about, yanking off the flower heads as if it was her last chance to destroy them.

Suddenly Elsie froze and stared over my shoulder as if she saw something behind me. Slowly, I turned my head to look. A dim light floated across the lawn toward us, wobbling a bit as it came. One of the night nurses must have seen me and was coming to fetch me. What trouble I'd be in after she reported me to Dr. Benson.

"It's that crazy old lady," Elsie whispered. "She's coming to get me."

“It can’t be Mrs. Jameson,” I whispered back. “Her hip’s broken, she has pneumonia—she can’t get out of bed.”

“Don’t you see her? She’s right there, plain as day.”

I looked where Elsie pointed, but all I saw was the glow from the nurse’s lantern.

Elsie ducked behind me and grasped me around my waist. She held me so tightly I could scarcely breathe. I struggled to get away, sure she meant to suffocate me, but her grip was like death itself, cold and hard and merciless.

“What do you want, old lady?” Elsie shouted.

I heard no answer, but Elsie said, “I don’t need your help. I have my friend Annie and I won’t leave her!”

A breeze came up then, bringing with it the smell of lilacs. The light came closer and a hand touched my face. Slowly Mrs. Jameson began to take shape as if she’d been drawn faintly on tracing paper.

“What are you doing outside in the cold?” I cried. “I don’t understand. You should be in bed.”

“It’s all right, Annie,” she said. “I’ve come to take Elsie home.”

“Don’t believe her! She’s here to get even with me!” Elsie let me go and climbed a tree. Like a wild animal, she crouched near the top and glared down through her tangle of hair. “You hate me because I pushed you down the stairs!”

“No, Elsie, I don’t hate you. I simply want to help you.”

“Ha,” Elsie shouted. “I don’t trust you one bit. You’ll take me to the cemetery and put me in my coffin. You’ll drive a stake through my heart to make me stay there!”

“Please come down and talk to me,” Mrs. Jameson begged. “I can’t climb up there, Elsie.”

“Talk to me from where you are. I can hear you just fine, old lady.”

“Come down, Elsie.” Mrs. Jameson stretched out her hand. “Please listen to me.”

Elsie stayed where she was. “Why should I do what you say?”

“Because I can take you to your mother.”

“Liar. You don’t know my mother. You don’t know where she is.” Elsie gripped the branch she sat on and stared down at Mrs, Jameson. “If my mother loved me, she’d come for me herself.”

“She doesn’t know the way. You must go to her. And I can show you the way.”

“I don’t believe you.” Elsie yanked a pinecone from a branch and threw it at Mrs. Jameson. When it had no effect, she hurled another. Soon the air was full of pinecones. Some hit me, but none touched Mrs. Jameson.

“I don’t have much time,” Mrs. Jameson said, “and neither do you. If you don’t come down soon, I’ll be forced to leave without you. Once I’m gone, you’ll be stranded here for a long time. Believe me, you’ll be very unhappy.”

“Then go, old lady, go, and leave me be! I’m staying where I am. Even if Annie won’t help me, I’m not leaving until I get even with Rosie and the others.”

“Elsie,” I called, “please do what Mrs. Jameson says. You can trust her. She’d never lie to you.”

“Ha. As if I believe a word that comes out of your lying mouth, Annie Browne. I have a mind to stay here and torment you for the rest of your life.”

“That’s enough, Elsie.” Mrs. Jameson went to the foot of the tree. “It would break your mother’s heart to see you behaving like this.”

“She doesn’t care about me, she never did.”

“Why do you say that?”

“If she loved me, she wouldn’t have died. She would’ve stayed with me and taken care of me.”

“Nonsense.” Mrs. Jameson gazed at Elsie. “Your mother didn’t want to die.”

Elsie began to cry. “I don’t know what to do,” she wailed. “I don’t know where to go!”

I climbed up into the tree. She kicked my face with her bare feet, but I didn’t feel anything but cold.

“Go away, Annie.”

“No, not until you do what Mrs. Jameson tells you.”

She climbed higher. A branch snagged her hair, and strands of it floated away on a breeze. In the bright light, I saw she’d begun to lose her edges.

“You’re disappearing,” I whispered.

“What does that mean?” Elsie asked.

From the ground, Mrs. Jameson answered. “It means you’ll be stranded here for hundreds of years if you don’t come with me now. No one will see

you, no one will you hear you. You'll be all alone. An angry spirit doomed to harm the living but not to enjoy doing it. You'll be miserable."

"Maybe I won't be miserable," Elsie said. "Maybe I'll like it." Her voice shook as she spoke, and I knew she was terrified.

"Listen to what she says," I begged. "Believe her. Go with her."

Elsie looked at me and then down at Mrs. Jameson. Her grip on the branch loosened. "You better be telling the truth, old lady."

Mrs. Jameson held out her arms. "I swear to you, Elsie, you'll soon be with your mother."

Slowly Elsie let go and floated to earth. Mrs. Jameson took her hand. "How will she know me? I was just a baby when she died."

"Don't worry." Mrs. Jameson squeezed Elsie's hand. "Mothers always know their children."

Elsie frowned and smoothed her ragged dress. She touched her strands of tangled hair. "I look horrible."

"You'll look beautiful to your mother."

While they talked, my heart swelled with grief. To lose Elsie it seemed I had to lose Mrs. Jameson, too. I hadn't expected that.

"What about me?" I cried to Mrs. Jameson. "What will I do without you?"

"Oh, Annie, my dear, dear Annie. Soon you'll be home with your mother and father. You won't need me then."

Elsie scowled at me. "She's *my* friend now. Not yours."

Mrs. Jameson sighed. "Oh, Elsie, I'm Annie's friend, too. You must leave those feelings behind." She gripped Elsie's hand. "Say goodbye to Annie. We must go now."

"Well, goodbye," Elsie muttered.

I reached for Mrs. Jameson and tried to keep her for a moment but she and Elsie were both fading into the mist and shadows. There was nothing solid to hold.

"Farewell, my dear," Mrs. Jameson whispered. "I've enjoyed the time we spent together."

As the two of them disappeared into the night, three deer came to the edge of the pond and drank. A muskrat swam into sight, its slick head above the water. Overhead, the constellations kept their vigil.

Suddenly afraid, I ran across the grass and climbed through my window. On silent feet, I tiptoed through the corridors that led to the infirmary. I had

to know. I had to see for myself.

At the infirmary door, I paused. The night nurse was asleep at her desk. In their beds the old people moaned and whimpered in their sleep. Some snored, some coughed, one whispered, “Who’s there? Is it you, Amelia? Have you come to take me home?”

Just as I’d feared, Mrs. Jameson’s bed was empty. A bare mattress stripped of sheets and blankets waited for the next occupant.

In deep sadness, I lay on her bed and looked out the window to see what Mrs. Jameson had seen. Beyond the glass was the dark sky, a sprinkle of stars, a half moon, and the constellations in their appointed places. In the distance, the lights of Mount Pleasant glowed.

“I’ll miss you so much,” I whispered to the listening dark.

I lay there, thinking about Mrs. Jameson. I smelled the smells she’d smelled. I heard the sounds she’d heard. I saw the things she’d seen. It was as if part of her had stayed in Cedar Grove to comfort me.

Just as the sky began to lighten, I tiptoed away, careful not to disturb the nurse or the old people wrapped in their dreams.

My own room was empty. And silent. I got into bed and pulled the covers up. Nobody would snatch them off while I slept. Nobody would throw my things on the floor. Nobody would hang by her knees from my curtain rod. Nobody would write on my walls.

Nobody would sing “I ain’t got no body.”

I closed my eyes and fell into the deepest sleep I’d had for a long time.

TWENTY-FIVE

I CAME HOME from Cedar Grove in April. Forsythia blazed like yellow fire. The trees were a soft golden green with the hint of new leaves, and lawns were lush with grass. The sun shone, the sky glowed deep blue with a scattering of clouds, and people strolled along the streets, some walking dogs, others pushing baby carriages, boys on bikes, girls playing jump rope.

The normal world I'd missed so much had moved from winter to spring just as it always did, but I was a stranger, a convalescent, someone who had been in a rest home. Would anyone be my friend? Or would I take Elsie's place as the outsider?

At the corner of Portman Street, Mother told me to close my eyes. "Don't open them until I tell you to."

Mystified, I did what she said. They must have a surprise for me—perhaps the shiny new bicycle I wanted.

The car stopped, and Mother said, "Open your eyes, Annie."

On our front porch, my classmates let out a cheer and held up signs welcoming me home in big red letters. Miss Harrison presented me with a bouquet of roses and hugged me. "We're so glad to see you, Annie!"

The next minute, my friends surrounded me. Everyone talked at once. They'd missed me. Had I missed them? Would I be in school on Monday? They gave me welcome-home cards they'd made in class. They hugged me. They complimented me on my dress. They admired my new patent-leather shoes. They loved the lavender ribbon in my hair.

Jane stuck by my side and clung to my hand as if I might disappear at any moment. Lucy and Eunice told me stories about school and made me laugh.

Only Rosie hung back, not quite meeting my eyes. She was thinner than I remembered. Her face was pale, and her eyes were ringed with dark circles. Her hair had lost its brightness. Worst of all, the spark that had made her our leader had disappeared.

Jane noticed me looking at Rosie. Coming closer, she whispered, “Rosie hasn’t been herself since she had the flu. She almost died, you know.”

Immediately I felt guilty about the flu mask. Why had I let Elsie make me put it in Rosie’s bookbag?

“Her mother and father are taking her to Hilltop Lodge for the whole summer. Dr. Hughes thinks the fresh mountain air will improve her health. She’ll ride ponies and swim in the lake and play tennis. Doesn’t that sound grand?”

I glanced at Rosie, still standing alone on the edge of the group. This time she looked straight at me, but she didn’t smile or wave.

Without noticing Rosie, Mother walked between us. “The cake and ice cream are ready to serve, Annie. Would you like to help me?”

I followed Mother to the table she’d set up on the porch, and the girls gathered around. While Mother cut the cake, I poured glasses of punch and Miss Harrison scooped ice cream.

Rosie was the last in line. After Miss Harrison topped her slice of cake with ice cream, Rosie lingered a moment.

“I need to talk to you, Annie,” she asked. “May I stop at your house on my way home from school?” Even her voice was different—flat and dull, barely louder than a whisper.

“If it’s about the flu mask in your bookbag—”

“No, no. Not that. I know what happened. It’s about something else altogether.”

She walked through the crowd and sat on the porch steps, where she ate her cake and ice cream alone.

When everyone had finished eating, Miss Harrison called, “It’s time to return to school, girls. Please thank Mrs. Browne for the delicious refreshments.”

The girls moaned and groaned and begged to stay longer, but she reminded them this was a special treat for me and they mustn’t tire me out. “Remember, you’ll see Annie on Monday.”

When they were gone, Mother noticed the yawns I tried to stifle. “You look like you need a nice rest, Annie. Why don’t you go to your room and lie down for a while?”

I climbed the stairs slowly and hesitated in the doorway. My bed waited, its pillows fluffed. My books stood in straight rows on shelves. Drawing

supplies lay neatly on my desk. The scent of spring drifted through the open window and stirred the curtains.

A cloud moved across the sun and darkened my room. The corners filled with shadows. Frightened, I drew back. Suppose Elsie had escaped from her grave again? Suppose she waited for me in the closet or under my bed? She might appear at any moment, swinging upside down from my curtain rod or sitting in my rocking chair, gloating. She might pick up a jar of poster paint and hurl it at the wall. Mother would think I did it, and she'd send me back to Cedar Grove, and everything would start all over again.

Suddenly Mother was beside me, her arm around my shoulders. "Is everything all right, Annie?"

I turned and clung to her as if I were three years old. "Am I really home to stay?"

Her arms tightened around me. "Yes, of course you are."

"And you'll never send me away again, no matter how bad I am?"

"Oh, darling, we didn't send you away to punish you. The concussion was worse than Dr. Hughes originally thought. He feared a swelling in your brain was causing your strange behavior. We sent you to Cedar Grove so you could get the rest and recuperation you needed."

She drew back and smiled down at me. "And just look at you. Your cheeks are pink with health, and you're yourself again. Our Annie, home to stay."

I leaned against her, breathing in the familiar lilac scent of her face powder, and knew I was safe.

Mother smoothed my hair and kissed me. "You can't imagine how empty this house has been without you."

I took off my shoes and lay on my bed. Mother covered me with a light blanket and closed the curtains. Kissing me once again, she went downstairs.

Later that afternoon, Mother shook my shoulder gently. "Wake up, Annie," she said. "Rosie is here."

Rosie sat on the parlor sofa, waiting for me. "I'm glad to see you, Annie. I missed you."

"I missed you, too."

Rosie turned her head and coughed.

"Are you all right?" I asked her.

“I’m not over the flu yet,” she told me. “My mother is taking me to the mountains this summer. Dr. Hughes believes fresh air is what I need to get my strength back.”

“Jane told me. She says there’ll be ponies and tennis and swimming. It sounds wonderful.”

Mother appeared with a tray and two glasses of lemonade. “Would you like to sit on the porch? It’s a lovely day.”

We followed her outside and sat side by side on the swing. I knew Mother was worried about Rosie, and I was glad she’d thought to bring us something to drink.

After Mother went back inside, Rosie said, “I didn’t come here to talk about Hilltop Lodge.”

Something about her voice and the look in her eyes made me nervous. “What do you want to talk about, then?”

I waited for her to go on, but she gazed silently across the lawn, beyond the tallest trees to the sky darkening now and then with passing clouds. She sat with her arms folded tightly across her chest, as if she were holding herself together. Tiny threads of blue veins were visible under the skin of her temples.

Although I’d never known Rosie O’Malley to be afraid of anything, she was definitely scared. “Tell me, Rosie,” I begged. “What’s frightening you?”

Without looking at me, Rosie told me. “While I was sick I had terrible dreams—not nightmares, much worse than nightmares. Dr. Hughes said they were hallucinations brought on by my fever. But I think they were real. She really was in my room, Annie. Every night, every single night, she sat on my bed and watched me. She was waiting for me to die. She knew I would. I was too sick to live much longer.”

“Who?” I asked. “Who was sitting on your bed?” I waited for her to tell me, but I knew the answer already.

“You know,” Rosie said. “You saw her, too.”

Before I could say *Elsie,* Rosie pressed a thin, cold finger against my mouth. “Don’t say her name. Don’t ever say her name!”

“Why not?”

Rosie stared past me as if she saw something stir in the shadows under the fir tree. “She might think you’re calling her.”

I peered into the shadows too. I saw nothing but a slight movement in the branches. The wind, I told myself, just the wind passing through. Not her, not her. But how many times had I said her name after she'd gone away? If Rosie was right . . . *No, don't think about it,* I told myself. *She's gone, gone, gone. Forever gone.*

Rosie spoke so softly I had to lean close to hear her. "She told me she made you put the flu mask in my bookbag. She said *she* gave me the flu because I stole her mask and she caught the flu and died. I had to pay for her life with mine unless I became her friend. I told her I'd rather die. She said it made no difference. Alive or dead, I'd never get away from her."

I stared at Rosie in amazement. "She told me the same thing. We'd be friends forever, just her and me, nobody else. She wanted me to help her pay back her enemies, starting with you."

Rosie seized my hands. "Oh, Annie, what will she do to us?"

I squeezed Rosie's cold hands. "She can't do anything to you or me or anyone else. She's gone forever."

"How do you know that?"

"I saw her go." While Rosie huddled beside me in the swing, I told her about my last night with Elsie. "She left peacefully. She won't come back."

Rosie sighed deeply. We sat side by side, gently rocking the swing back and forth, back and forth. The only sound was the creak of the ropes. The sun was low now, and the shadows on the lawn were darker and longer.

On the other side of town, evening shadows crept across Forest Heights Cemetery. A solitary crow perched on the outstretched hand of a stone angel. The wind blew, and the shadows shifted. Slowly the crow lifted its wings and flew away into the dark sky.

COUNTING CROWS

One Crow for sorrow,
Two Crows for mirth;
Three Crows for a wedding,
Four Crows for a birth;
Five Crows for silver,
Six Crows for gold;
Seven Crows for a secret, not to be told;
Eight Crows for heaven,
Nine Crows for hell;
And ten Crows for the devil's own self.

—Counting Rhyme (from *The Folklore of Birds,* by Laura C. Martin, 1993)

AFTERWORD

One of my inspirations for this novel is a story my mother told me. In the fall of 1918, when she was twelve years old, the Spanish Influenza came to America. Before the flu ran its course in the spring of 1919, more than thirty million people had died worldwide. People likened the flu to the bubonic plague. Some thought the world's entire population would be wiped out.

In Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, people died by the thousands. There was no cure. Coffins were in short supply. Bodies were stacked in morgues waiting for burial. Streets were clogged with horse-drawn hearses. Funeral bells rang all day. Schools closed, department stores closed, theaters closed. It was unlawful to spit in the street. Handkerchiefs were required. Although flu masks did not prevent the flu's transmission, many people wore them anyway.

When World War I ended on November 11, 1918, soldiers and sailors brought an even more virulent strain of flu home with them.

My mother and her friends lived in Baltimore. That fall, they walked past many houses with black funeral wreaths on their doors. A wreath announced an occupant's death. At that time, most families kept their dead at home for a few days before they were taken away for the funeral and burial. The coffin and its occupant were on display in the parlor. Friends and relatives visited to express their condolences. The family provided refreshments.

One of my mother's friends came up with the brilliant idea of posing as acquaintances of the dead, visiting the home to express sorrow, and then partaking of the refreshments. Free cake. Free candy. Free punch. Although my mother was afraid of seeing a dead person, she went along with her friends and ate her share of sweets.

Then came the day the girls looked into a coffin and were horrified to see one of their classmates. They hadn't known she'd died. That was the end of the visitations and the free sweets.

In 1919, my mother herself came down with the Spanish Influenza. She became ill on a streetcar ride with her mother and father. By the time she got home, she had a high fever. She spent several weeks in bed, and when she recovered, she was thin and weak, too tired to do anything. To build up her strength, her parents took her to Pen Mar, a resort near the Maryland–Pennsylvania border, where she spent the summer convalescing. By August, she'd regained her energy and strength, and came home eager to see her friends.

TOOK

A Ghost Story

MARY DOWNING HAHN

CLARION BOOKS
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
Boston New York

The Beginning

The old woman stands on the hilltop, just on the edge of the woods, well hidden from the farmhouse below. Two men and a woman are getting out of a car that has a sign for Jack Lingo Realty painted on the side. The old woman has seen plenty of Realtors in her time. She doesn't know this one, but she remembers his pa, old Jack Lingo, and *his* pa, Edward, and the one afore him, back and back through the years to the first Lingo ever to settle in this valley and take up the buying and selling of houses.

Though young Lingo doesn't know it, Auntie is helping him sell that house to the man and the woman in the only way she knows—muttering and humming and moving her hands this way and that way, weaving spells in the air, sending messages as she's always done. Messages that make folks need things not worth needing. Dangerous things. Things they regret getting.

You might wonder why Auntie wants this man and woman to buy the house. Truth to tell, she doesn't give a hoot about them. They're ignorant fools, but they have something she wants, and she aims to get it. It's almost time for the change, and they've come on schedule, just as she'd known they would.

"New for old," she chants to herself. "Strong for weak, healthy for sickly, pretty for ugly."

When the man and the woman follow young Lingo into the old Estes house, Auntie sways back and forth, grinning and rubbing her dry, bony hands together. Her skirt blows in the wind, and long strands of white hair whip around her face. With a little hop and a jig, she turns to something hidden in the trees behind her. "Won't be long now, my boy. We'll get rid of the old pet and get us a new one to raise up."

Though he stays out of sight, her companion makes a noise like a hog when it's hungry—a squealing sort of snort that might be a laugh, or it might be something else altogether.

Auntie gazes down at the rundown farmhouse and outbuildings, the overgrown fields, the woods creeping closer year by year. From the hill, she

can see the missing shingles in the roof, the warped boards riddled with termites and dry rot, the cracks in the chimney.

Almost fifty years have passed since the Estes family left the place. Nobody has lived there since then. Local folk avoid the place. They scare their children with stories about the girl, the one before her, and the one before her, back and back to the very first girl. Fear keeps them out of the woods and away from the cabin on Brewster's Hill. Those children know all about Auntie and her companion.

But newcomers always show up, city people who've never heard the stories. If the valley folk try to warn them, they scoff and laugh and call the stories superstitious nonsense. They come from places where lights burn all night. They don't heed the dark and what hides there.

It all works to Auntie's advantage.

Down below, a door opens, and Auntie watches young Lingo lead the man and woman outside. Even though they speak softly, Auntie hears every word. They aim to buy that tumbledown wreck of a house, fix it up, and live there with their children, a boy and a girl, they tell him. It's just what they want—a chance to get away from their old life and start anew in the country. They'll get some chickens, they say, a couple of goats, maybe even a cow or a sheep. They'll plant a garden, grow their own food.

The man and the woman get into the Realtor's car, laughing, excited. Auntie spits into the dirt. Fools. They'll find out soon enough.

She listens to the car's engine until she can't hear it anymore. Then she snaps her fingers and does another jig. "It's falling into place just like I predicted, dear boy, but don't you say a word to her back at the cottage. She ain't to know till it happens."

Her companion snorts and squeals, and the two of them disappear into the dark woods.

To wait.

ONE

It was a long drive from Fairfield, Connecticut, to Woodville, West Virginia—two days, with an overnight stay in Maryland. My sister, Erica, and I were sick of the back seat, sick of each other, and mad at our parents for making us leave our home, our school, and our friends.

Had they asked us how we felt about moving? Of course not. They've never been the kind of parents who ask if you want to drink your milk from the red glass or the blue glass. They just hand you a glass, and that's that. Milk tastes the same whether the glass is blue or red or purple.

Going to West Virginia was a big thing, something we should have had a say in, but no. They left us with a neighbor, drove down there, found a house they liked, and bought it. Just like that.

They were the grownups, the adults, the parents. They were in charge. They made the decisions.

In all fairness, they had a reason for what they did. Dad worked for a big corporation. He earned a big salary. We had a big house, two big cars, and all sorts of other big stuff—expensive stuff. Erica and I went to private school. Mom didn't work. She was what's called a soccer mom, driving me and Erica and our friends to games and clubs and the country club pool. She and Dad played golf. They were planning to buy a sailboat.

But then the recession came along, and the big corporation started laying people off. Dad was one of them. He thought he'd find another job fast, but he didn't. A year went by. One of our big cars was repossessed. Erica and I went to public school. We gave up the country club. There was no more talk about sailboats.

The bank started sending letters. Credit card companies called. Dad and Mom were maxed out financially. The mortgage company threatened foreclosure.

So we had to sell the house. I can understand that. But why did we have to move to West Virginia? It was cheaper to live there, Dad said. Erica and I would love it. So much space—woods and fields and mountains. He took to singing "Country Roads," an old John Denver song about West Virginia,

putting lots of emphasis on “Almost heaven, West Virginia.” He also informed us that the license plates said “Wild, Wonderful.”

So here we were, on an interstate highway, with nothing to see but mountains and woods, wild but not wonderful, in my opinion. It was like being in a foreign country. How would I ever get used to all the nature surrounding us?

Beside me, Erica was talking to the doll Mom had given her—not because it was her birthday or anything, but because she was so unhappy about leaving Fairfield.

That’s rewarding bad behavior, if you ask me. I was just as unhappy as my sister, but since I didn’t cry myself to sleep and mope in my room and refuse to eat, all I got was a pair of binoculars and Peterson’s *Field Guide to Birds of North America*. Dad thought I might like to identify the birds we were sure to see when we went hiking. Well, maybe I would, but still, that doll was ten times more expensive than my binoculars. It came with a little trunk full of clothes. There were even outfits in my sister’s size so she and the doll could dress alike. It had its own bed, too. And its hair was red just like Erica’s and cut the same way.

All the time we were in the van, Erica talked to the doll. She tried all its clothes on and told the doll how pretty it was. She hugged it and kissed it. She even named it Little Erica.

It was making me sick. But every time I complained, Erica got mad and we started quarreling and Mom turned around and blamed it all on me. “Leave your sister alone, Daniel,” she’d say. “She’s perfectly happy playing with Little Erica. Read a book or something.”

“You know I can’t read in the car. Do you want me to barf all over that stupid doll?”

At last we turned off the interstate. The roads narrowed and ran up and down hills, crossed fields, passed farms, and tunneled through woods. We glimpsed mountains and swift rivers. The towns were farther apart and smaller, some no more than a strip of houses and shops along the road.

By the time Dad finally pulled off an unpaved road and headed down a narrow driveway, the woods around us were dark. In the van’s headlights the trees looked like a stage set lit by spotlights.

The van bounced over ruts and bumps, tossing Erica and me toward and away from each other. “Stay on your side, Daniel,” Erica said, “and stop

banging into me and Little Erica. We don't like it."

"That doll doesn't care—she's not real."

"She is so!"

"Be quiet, Daniel," Mom said.

"It's not my fault," I said. "Instead of blaming me, tell Dad to slow down."

Just then we came out of the woods, and I got my first view of the house. It stood in the middle of a field of tall grass—weeds, actually. Even in the dark I could see that the place was a wreck. The porch sagged under the weight of vines growing up the walls and across the roof. Tall, shaggy bushes blocked most of the windows on the first floor. Shutters hung crooked. Some were missing altogether. I was sure it hadn't been painted for a long time.

Erica was the first to speak. "It's scary."

"What's scary about it?" Dad asked.

"It's dark." She hugged her doll tightly. "The woods are scary, too. And there aren't any other houses."

"Wait until morning, Erica," Mom said. "It's lovely in the daylight. You'll see."

"And we have a few neighbors down the road," Dad added.

How far down the road? I wondered. And what were they like?

Dad and Mom got out of the van and headed toward the house. Erica ran to catch up and slipped her hand into Mom's. I followed them, breathing in the unfamiliar smell of the woods and listening to night sounds. Wind rattled branches and hissed through the weeds in the field. A shutter banged against the side of the house. An owl called from the woods.

At the same moment, something made the hair on my neck rise. Sure that someone was watching us, I turned around and stared down the dark driveway. I saw no one, but I shivered—and not because I was cold.

Arrival

The old woman stands on the hilltop, at the edge of the woods, well hidden from the farmhouse below, just as she did before, but now it's a dark, cold night, lit by the moon. All around her, bushes and branches rattle in a wind that carries autumn's breath. But she isn't cold. She leans on her staff and peers toward the road.

"They're coming," she calls to her companion. He snorts and continues snuffling about in the dead leaves for good things to eat.

Headlights bounce down the driveway. A big car stops by the house. Even in the dark a person can see that it's a ramshackle wreck of a place, ready to topple with the first strong wind that comes its way.

The car doors open and the interior lights come on. She sees the girl, just the one she needs. The child gets out, clutching a dolly. The old woman sniffs fear. The girl is scared of the dark and the old house. She doesn't want to live here. Well, she won't live here long, will she?

The girl's name is blown by the wind across the dark field and laid at the old woman's feet. Erica. Air-ric-cah. She likes to draw the name out, especially the last syllable.

"Air-ric-cah, Air-ric-cah," the old woman whispers. The name glides lightly through the air, a rustle of black silk thread, and winds itself into the girl's ear.

She sees the girl tense and look around, move closer to her mother.

"Yes," the old woman hisses. "You'll do. Air-ric-cah, Air-ric-cah."

She does one of her little jigs and calls to her companion. "Time to go, dear boy. We'll see her soon, don't you worry. She's the one, she's ours."

As the family enters their new home, the old woman and her companion wrap themselves in darkness and make their way home.

TWO

While we waited on the porch, Dad fished a big old-fashioned key out of his pocket. With a lot of effort he finally got it to turn in the lock. Moonlight followed us inside and cast our shadows across the dusty floor. In front of us, stairs led to the second story.

Mom flicked a switch, and the shadows fled. To the right was the living room, or maybe the parlor, empty now except for a fireplace. Three tall windows with old-fashioned wavy glass reflected us standing in the hall, slightly distorted, like people in a fun house.

"Where's our furniture?" Erica asked.

"It's coming tomorrow," Mom told her.

"But where are we sleeping?" she asked, sounding a bit tearful.

"Don't you remember?" Dad asked. "We brought our camping stuff—sleeping bags, foam mats, pillows, blankets."

"Can I sleep with Mommy?"

"Of course you can." Mom put her arm around Erica and hugged her.

I was getting pretty tired of Erica's clinging behavior. "What's wrong with you?" I whispered. "You never used to act like this."

"I never had to live in the woods before." She turned to Mom. "Are we going to eat wild berries?"

"Of course not, sweetie," Dad said. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"That's what happens sometimes in stories."

"Well, this isn't a story, Erica," Mom said.

Dad got an ancient gas stove going, and Mom heated a pot of water. When it boiled, she dumped in noodles and heated a jar of marinara sauce.

We ate our first meal in the house picnic style in front of the fire. Erica snuggled beside Mom and shared her food with Little Erica. The food stuck to the doll's face, and Erica tenderly wiped her clean with a napkin.

Later, we all crawled into our sleeping bags and watched what was left of the fire fall into ash. The lights were out, and the moon shone in through the tall windows. I heard Erica whispering to the doll.

Sometime during the night I woke up. I'd drunk too much soda at dinner, and now I needed the bathroom. I eased out of my sleeping bag and got to

my feet. Dad snored, Mom slept like a dead woman, and Erica murmured as if she were dreaming.

I tiptoed across the floor and eased the front door open. It was easier to pee outside than find my way upstairs to the bathroom.

The moonlight was brilliant and the stars were clustered thickly over my head, more than I'd ever seen in Fairfield. After I finished what I came out to do, I stood on the porch and gazed at the dark mass of woods bordering the fields. The night was cold, but as I turned to go inside, I was stopped by a sound in the darkness—a howl, which might have been the wind in the trees but was scarier. Much scarier. I shivered and edged toward the door, but before I stepped inside, I looked back. Something moved at the edge of the woods. Its head gleamed in the moonlight, as white as bone. I heard the howl again, louder this time, and stumbled backward, slamming and bolting the door.

"Daniel," Mom called sleepily, "what are you doing up in the middle of the night?"

"I went outside to pee. Something in the woods howled." I slid into my sleeping bag, shivering with cold and fear.

"Shh," she whispered. "You'll wake up Dad and Erica."

"Didn't you hear it?"

She shook her head. "It was probably an owl or a fox."

"No. I saw it," I told her. "It was as tall as a man, and its head shone in the moonlight."

Mom smoothed my hair. "Go back to sleep, Daniel. There's nothing out there. It's dark, you're in a strange place, and your eyes were playing tricks on you."

I moved a little closer to her. Maybe she was right. She must be right. Monsters didn't roam the woods anywhere but in fairy tales. I closed my eyes and practiced breathing slowly and deeply, but it was almost daylight by the time I fell asleep.

When I woke up, sunlight filled the living room. Just as Mom had said, whatever I'd heard and seen in the dark had a natural explanation—night noises most likely, animals going about their nocturnal business, embellished with my imagination. Moonlight and shadows play tricks on you.

The moving truck arrived before we'd finished breakfast, and Mom put us all to work. We picked our bedrooms first. Mine overlooked the woods,

which were not quite as close to the house as I'd thought the night before, but close enough for me to see a deer pause at the edge of the trees and then vanish into the shadows. The lawns in Connecticut were overrun with deer, but this was a wild deer and therefore more noble than the ones who ate our shrubbery and our flowers and the vegetables Mom tried to grow.

Erica's room was across the hall from mine, at the front of the house. Mom and Dad were next to her. The bedroom beside mine was reserved for Dad—his office, he called it. At the end of the hall was a small room, probably a sewing room, Mom said, or a nursery. She claimed it for her weaving. "The loom will fit just right under the windows," she said.

The moving men spent most of the day tramping around the house, upstairs and down, putting furniture where Mom told them to. When they finally drove away, Mom gave us our next tasks. Unpack our clothes and belongings and put them away.

I finished first and stopped in Erica's room to see how she was doing. Her clothes lay in a heap on her unmade bed. Her boxes of toys and books sat in the middle of the floor, where the moving men had left them, still taped shut. Erica sat on a window seat, her back to me. She held Little Erica.

"We don't like it here," Erica whispered to the doll. "It's a bad, scary place, no matter what they say. You and I know, but nobody believes us."

Little Erica had nothing to say that I could hear, but my sister bent her head close to the doll as if she were listening to her. "Yes," she murmured. "Yes."

I hated to interrupt the weird conversation, but I stepped into the room and said, "Mom told you to put your stuff away, but you haven't even started."

Erica whirled around. Her red hair swung like a flag. And so did the doll's. "I'm never going to put anything away until we go home."

"*This* is home now." I picked up a box labeled SOCKS AND UNDERWEAR and pried off the tape. "I'll help you."

"Leave my things alone!" Erica laid the doll down and snatched the box away. "Get out of my room, Daniel. We don't want you here."

"What's going on?" Mom stood in the doorway.

"I was just trying to help her unpack."

"I don't want him to help," Erica said. "I'm leaving everything just like this until we go home."

"Honey, we *are* home." Mom tried to hug her, but she pulled away.

"Home is Connecticut," Erica whispered. "Not *here*."

Mom made a gesture toward the door. "Leave this to me, Daniel."

As I left the room, Mom shut the door. I lingered in the hall for a moment. Mom was talking softly. Erica was crying.

I found Dad in the basement in front of a huge furnace that looked like something you'd find on the *Nautilus*, all dials and levers and doors and pipes. A submarine engine only Captain Nemo understood. Steampunk in every way.

"Let me see," Dad mused. "It's September. Hopefully, I'll have time to figure out how this monster works before we need it."

I pictured a long, cold winter, with the four of us huddled around the fireplace to keep warm.

"Or maybe I can call somebody from the oil company," Dad went on, "and he can explain it to me."

We stood side by side and looked around the basement. It was dark and dank and musty. The ceiling was so low Dad could barely stand up straight. Pipes festooned with cobwebs hung even lower. The only light was a bare bulb hanging by a cord from a crossbeam. The floor was dirt, the walls stone. The damp air smelled as if it had been trapped down here since the house was built.

"Once I establish myself as a photographer," Dad said, "we'll fix this basement up. Replace the furnace with something new that I can understand. Put in some windows, maybe a sliding glass door. I could even build a darkroom and get out my old film cameras."

While Dad was picturing a darkroom and sliding glass doors, I was imagining a murderer carrying his victims down the steep, rickety steps and digging graves in the dirt floor.

"I'm going outside," I told Dad. "I could use some fresh air."

Leaving him poking around in the junk piled in every corner, I found Mom at the kitchen table, busy sorting napkins and tablecloths. Erica was sitting near her, reading *Bedtime for Frances* to Little Erica. Neither of them noticed me, so I slipped out the back door to do some exploring.

The house looked even worse in daylight. Peeling paint exposed bare gray wood. A gutter dangled from the eaves, and a downspout lay in the weeds. Judging by the number of shingles I saw on the ground, the roof

probably leaked. The porch floorboards were warped, the railing was loose, and the steps tilted to one side.

Behind the house, I discovered a small tumbledown barn almost hidden under a tangle of wild grapevines, honeysuckle, poison ivy, and brambles. All around it grew a jungle of pokeberry weeds taller than I was. Poisonous berries hung from the red stalks in black clusters, like grapes. Sticking up from the weeds were two doorless refrigerators, an old plow, an ancient Ford pickup truck, several rusted air conditioners, and a mildewed sofa. The town dump, I thought, right in our own backyard.

What were Dad and Mom thinking when they bought this place? Had they lost their minds? We'd never get the house fixed up, let alone clear the junk out. I felt like packing my belongings and siding with Erica. Maybe between the two of us we could persuade Mom and Dad to go back to Connecticut.

THREE

The next day, we went to Home Depot. We couldn't afford to paint the outside of the house yet. That would have to wait. But we could afford to make the inside look better.

I chose blue for my room, and Erica chose lavender for hers. Mom and Dad picked shades of beige for everything else, except for the kitchen, which was to be yellow. A bright, cheerful color, Mom said.

It took a week to paint the house. All of us, even Erica, helped scrape and sand and clean the walls. When we finally finished, the place looked more like home—our pictures on the walls, our furniture in the rooms, our books on the shelves. We ate dinner at our dining room table using our plates and glasses and silverware. We ate breakfast and lunch at our kitchen table. Mom's collection of teapots appeared on a shelf in a kitchen. Dad helped her set up a loom in the little room upstairs. He organized his office and arranged his pipe collection in his barrister bookcase. He hung his diploma from UMass.

In my room, I lined up my books on a shelf Dad made for me. I kept my Star Wars figures and my puzzle collection on their own shelves. Posters of Spider-Man and Captain America hung on one wall. A movie ad for *The Hobbit* hung between the windows on the opposite wall. I was beginning to feel at home.

Erica finally unpacked her boxes and hung up her clothes. She folded underwear and socks and T-shirts and put them in bureau drawers. She arranged books and found places for her dolls and stuffed animals.

When she was finished, her room looked exactly like her room in Fairfield—her lavender checked curtains fit the new windows and the paint matched her old walls. The only difference was the view—woods and fields and mountains instead of green lawns and neighbors' houses.

The next week, Mom enrolled Erica and me in school. It was our first trip to Woodville itself. The shopping center on the outskirts of town had a Home Depot, a Walmart, and a Piggly Wiggly grocery store, as well as a nail salon, a liquor store, an insurance agent, a bank, Joe's Pizza, and a real

estate office with faded photos of houses for sale taped to the windows. What more did we need, Dad asked.

Whatever it was, we wouldn't find it in Woodville. Except for a used-clothing store, a bar, and a thrift shop, the buildings on Main Street were boarded up. Even the graffiti was faded.

Narrow streets ran uphill from one side of Main Street and downhill from the other side. Dogs barked as we drove by. A gust of wind blew newspapers down the street. We didn't see a single person. The whole town could have been abandoned, as far as I could tell. Except for the dogs, of course.

"Next time we'll take the scenic route," Mom said, "if there is one."

She turned off Main Street and drove uphill through a neighborhood of old houses that were slightly nicer than the ones we'd seen so far. The Woodville School was at the top of the hill—kindergarten through eighth grade, which meant that Erica's second grade classroom and my seventh grade classroom would be in the same building. The school was made of dark gray stone and had tall, narrow windows; a steep flight of steps led to the main entrance, a big black door. It might as well have been named the Bastille School for bad boys and girls.

Erica clung to Mom's hand. "I don't want to go here. It's ugly."

"Don't be silly." Shaking her hand free, Mom pulled open the door. "It will be fine," she added. "Just give it time."

I knew by the uncertainty in her voice that she didn't believe her own words. But what could she do? It was the only school in town.

Mom led us into an office filled with old-fashioned dark furniture. A thin woman looked up from a typewriter and did a funny thing with her mouth, which I think was meant to be a smile. Her hair was pulled tightly back from her face, and she wore a plain black dress with long sleeves. She scared Erica and made me nervous. Even Mom looked uncomfortable. According to the sign on her desk, she was Miss Danvers, school secretary.

"You must be Mrs. Anderson," she said to Mom. "And you are Erica and Daniel, if I'm not mistaken. Welcome to Woodville Elementary."

While Erica and I sat side by side, as silent as mutes, Mom filled out forms. Miss Danvers returned to her typing. I watched, fascinated by the sight of a real live person using an antique instead of a computer.

"Their official transcripts should arrive any day," Mom said as she handed Miss Danvers the completed paperwork.

A bald man with a gray mustache stuck his head out of an inner door and smiled at us. “I’m Mr. Sykes, the principal. I hope you two will enjoy our school—a bit smaller than you’re used to, I’m sure. Not as up to date, maybe, but—” The phone in his office rang, and he excused himself to answer it.

I knew sarcasm when I heard it.

Miss Danvers led the three of us down a hall. The walls were grayish green and bare. No bright paintings, no starred reports, no posters. The closed doors to classrooms were unadorned too. It was very different from the schools I’d gone to in Connecticut.

Miss Danvers stopped at a door labeled SEVENTH GRADE. “Wait here,” she told Mom and Erica.

Opening the door, she ushered me into the room. The teacher was a large woman with a stern face. She looked at me as if I were an invasive species.

The kids in the room stared at me. They sat in old-fashioned one-piece desks arranged in straight rows from the front to the back of the room. No artwork. No projects. Just the flag and a faded portrait of George Washington. The blackboard was made of slate, and sticks of chalk and erasers lay on the ledge beneath it. It looked like a classroom from an old black-and-white movie.

I glanced over my shoulder. Mom was staring into the room in disbelief. “Daniel, this is Miss Mincham, your teacher,” Miss Danvers said. Turning to the class, she added, “Boys and girls, Daniel’s from Connecticut, that little state near New York City.”

Their eyes flicked over me, taking in my khaki pants, turtleneck sweater, and parka—standard clothing in either Pine Ridge or Carson Middle School, but not here. The uniform for both boys and girls seemed to be jeans and T-shirts, old and faded and either too big or too small.

A boy in the back of the room snickered. He must have been fifteen or sixteen years old, from the size of him. Two girls whispered to each other and giggled.

Miss Mincham rose to her feet, an awe-inspiring sight. Almost six feet tall and weighing about two hundred pounds, she frowned at the boy in the back row and the two girls. Then she told me to take a seat in the back row —the empty one next to the giant boy.

The class was studying history. Miss Mincham called out events from the Revolutionary War and asked kids to supply the dates when they happened.

I've never been good at remembering stuff like that, so I didn't do any better than the rest of them. When she shifted the subject to math, she sent us to the blackboard for drills in long division. English consisted of reciting rules of grammar. And geography was naming capitals of foreign countries.

In the cafeteria, a kid knocked my lunch tray out of my hand and pretended it was an accident. In gym class, a bunch of boys cornered me in the locker room and shoved me around, sneering at my clothes and my snobby accent. Ignoring their behavior, the gym teacher blew his whistle and yelled, "Okay, that's enough, out on the floor, let's play some basketball." I was bumped into, tripped, and hit on the head with the ball—all accidentally of course.

By the end of the day, I hated Woodville School. I found Erica, and we boarded the bus that would take us home. The driver was a woman named Mrs. Plummer, the first nice person I'd met all day. She told us our stop was the last one. "It's a long ride," she said.

As we rumbled along narrow roads, uphill and down, letting kids off at farms and trailer parks along the way, the boy behind me kicked the back of my seat, and his friend said things like "I'm from Connecticut and I'm better than you," in what he thought was a good imitation of the accent I never knew I had.

Finally, there was only one kid on the bus beside Erica and me. Despite the lurching ride, he staggered up the aisle and sat down in front of us. Leaning over the back of the seat, he stared at us. He was maybe ten years old, a scrawny boy with dingy blond hair and sad brown eyes. He looked as if soap was not used in his house, either on him or on his clothes.

"My stop is the last one," he said. "Did you forget to get off?"

"No," I said. "We're the last stop."

He shook his head. "There's no stop after mine."

"We just moved here," I told him. "We live on a farm, just over the bridge."

His eyes widened. "You live on the Estes family farm?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. I don't know who used to live in our house."

I glanced at Erica, who was staring at the boy.

"Is something wrong with where we live?" she asked.

"It's where the girl disappeared," he said.

"What girl?"

I nudged her. "Don't listen to him. He's just trying to scare us."

He looked at me. “I’m not lying, if that’s what you think. Just ask anybody about Selene Estes. They’ll tell you.” He shoved his face close to Erica’s. “Something got her and drug her away and nobody ever saw her again.”

Erica drew back, her eyes fearful.

“Nothing dragged her away,” I told him. “She got lost and fell off a cliff or something.”

“Hah,” the boy said. “That’s what you think. There’s things out in these woods people from Con-neck-ti-cut ain’t never heard of.”

With a grinding of gears, the bus stopped and the boy got off. I looked out the window and saw him standing by the road, making a face at me. Then we jolted and bumped and swayed around a curve and up a hill, leaving him and his stories behind.

The bus made its next and final stop at the end of our driveway. As we got off, the driver, Mrs. Plummer, leaned out the door and called, “Don’t believe anything Brody Mason tells you. He’s a born liar, that boy.”

As the bus drove away, Erica turned to me. “Do you think a girl disappeared from our house?”

“Of course not,” I said. “You heard what the bus driver said. Brody or Brady, or whatever his name is, is a liar. He was trying to scare you.”

“He did scare me.” She fumbled to adjust the shoulder strap on her backpack. “He wasn’t lying, Daniel, I could tell.”

I straightened her strap for her. “Listen, Erica, that boy was definitely lying. And do you know why? The kids here don’t like us. We’re outsiders. That’s why they’re so mean.”

Erica turned to me, her eyes bright with tears. “My teacher, Mrs. Kline, is mean, too, even meaner than Miss Davis back at public school in Fairfield. She kept me in at recess and made me write one hundred times ‘I will not daydream in class.’ The girl who sits behind me whispered that I’m ugly. At lunchtime, all the girls laughed at me and said I talk funny and wear weird clothes. They wouldn’t let me sit at a table with them either.”

“It was exactly the same in my class,” I told her. “I got beaten up in gym, and my teacher called me stupid because I didn’t know the capital of Rhodesia or the exact date George Washington crossed the Delaware, let alone rules of grammar, which nobody ever taught me.”

“Maybe Mom will teach us at home.”

I shook my head. “No. She’ll just tell us to be patient and the kids will start liking us. You know, all of a sudden they’ll realize how nice we are. Even if we do come from Connecticut.”

“You don’t believe that, do you?”

“No,” I said. “In fact, I don’t think even Mom believes it.”

Erica frowned. “Do you hear noises at night?”

I looked at her, surprised by the sudden change of subject. “Do you?”

“Sometimes I hear a sort of whispering. Almost like somebody’s calling me. It sounds like this—*Air-ric-cah, Air-ric-cah*.”

She said it in a low, scary voice—a weird, drawn-out version of her name.

“It’s just the wind,” I told her. “Hear it blowing in the tops of the trees? It sounds like it’s whispering up there.”

Erica shook her head. “No, it’s not like trees or wind. It’s my name. Then it whispers other things. I can almost make out the words, but not quite.”

She broke away from me then and ran to meet Mom on the front porch, her red hair flying in the breeze, her backpack bouncing.

I followed her slowly, thinking about what she’d said. I was sure that Erica had imagined the whispering voice, but when I looked at the woods behind the house, I felt my chest tighten with anxiety. In the late-afternoon light, the shadows of the trees stretched across the field. The woods were already dark, and the mountainsides were in shadow.

Mom waved to me from the porch, and I broke into a run, suddenly eager to be inside, safe from whatever might be hiding in those woods—things that didn’t exist in Connecticut.

FOUR

After dinner that night, Erica told Mom and Dad about the boy on the bus and what he'd told us. Our parents agreed with me. This was an old, old farm, and no one had lived in the house for a long time. It was exactly the sort of place that inspired people to make up stories.

"It must be a country version of an urban legend," Dad said. "Like the man with the—"

Mom stopped him with a sharp look.

"The man with a what?" Erica asked.

"The man with a monkey," I said, to rescue Dad. I definitely didn't want him telling Erica about the man with the hook. In fact, I myself didn't want to hear that story, not here, not at night, not when anything could be out there howling in the dark, watching us through the tall living room windows Mom hadn't gotten around to covering with curtains.

"Does the monkey disappear?" Erica persisted.

"Of course not," I told her. "He and the man run away from the circus and live happily ever after in a tarpaper shack."

Erica laughed. "And they eat wild berries for breakfast, lunch, and dinner?"

Dad winked at me. "Exactly!"

Erica snuggled beside Mom on the couch and listened to a chapter of *The Moffats*, a book Mom loved when she was Erica's age. And still did.

But when it was time for bed, Erica said, "I don't want to go upstairs. It's so dark outside my window."

"Daniel's right across the hall from you," Mom said, "and Dad and I are in the next room."

"Will you come with me, Mommy?" Erica asked. "And tuck me in and sit with me till I fall asleep?"

Dad sighed. "Give in now, Martha, and it'll be the same every night."

Either Mom didn't hear him, or she ignored him. Scooping Erica up as if she were still a baby, she carried her upstairs.

Dad shook his head. "Your mother is spoiling that child."

I shrugged, opened my odious social studies book, and began memorizing the imports, exports, and native products of Germany. What a waste of time Woodville School was. My textbook had been published thirty years ago.

When I passed Erica's door later, I heard my sister say, "Are you sure it's just a legend?"

"Yes," Mom said. "Please stop worrying about it. No one disappeared. A girl named Selene never lived here. That boy was a liar."

The next morning, Erica and I sat in the front of the school bus, right behind Mrs. Plummer. The bus slowed for the second stop, and Brody got on. Erica stared out the window, pretending not to see him, but I gave him a dirty look. He made an ugly face, sat down behind us, and began kicking the back of my seat.

As the bus filled with kids, Brody told them where Erica and I lived.

One girl said she never walked down the road past our driveway. Her friend claimed that her big sister and some of her friends drove up the driveway on a dare. It was few years ago, when no one lived in the house.

"They heard people crying and wailing and calling Selene's name. They didn't see nothing, but they got out of there fast."

Erica pressed her fingers in her ears and hummed, but I listened to every word. If I was dumb enough to believe their stories, a family named Estes lived on the farm about forty or fifty years ago, maybe more, no one was sure. It was before they were born, but their parents or maybe their grandparents remembered it. They had a daughter named Selene, and she disappeared when she was seven years old, and no one ever found her. One girl said she was took. Maybe it was the demons in the woods, a boy suggested. Maybe Old Auntie the conjure woman up on Brewster's Hill got her, Brody said. Or, worst of all, a girl said, Old Auntie's razorback hog, the one called Bloody Bones, ate her up.

Nobody agreed about who took Selene, but they all agreed she was never found.

By the time we arrived at school, Erica was trembling. We waited until the bus was empty and then got up to leave.

Mrs. Plummer stopped Erica. "Don't let them scare you," she told my sister. "It's just a yarn people been spinning for years, not a speck of truth in

it. A girl named Selene disappeared, but she wasn't 'took.' There's no conjure woman and no Bloody Bones."

She rummaged in her purse, pulled out a pack of Life Savers, and handed it to Erica. "Help yourself. You, too."

We each took one and thanked her. "They're not really bad kids," Miss Plummer said. "Just nobody's taught them manners. They've grown up as wild as bears in the woods. Give them time. They'll get friendly when they're used to you."

A week passed, and another week followed, but those kids didn't get used to Erica and me. They didn't even try. Luckily, Mrs. Plummer saved the seat behind her for us, so no one could say or do anything to us without getting kicked off the bus.

Even so, they found ways to torment us with stories of Selene Estes. A whisper here, a comment there, a note or a drawing passed to us.

When we were off the bus, with no Mrs. Plummer to protect us, the boys continued to knock me around on the playground and the girls whispered about Erica. Unlike Mrs. Plummer, our teachers never noticed. Or maybe they just didn't care.

Mom and Dad didn't have any more luck in Woodville than we did—the adults disliked them for the same reasons the kids disliked Erica and me. They were especially offended by our failure to join the only church in town. We weren't only outsiders, we were godless outsiders.

As far as jobs went, neither Dad nor Mom found a position in Woodville. Not that there was much to choose from.

Dad finally got a job at Home Depot, where he wore a big orange apron and helped people find tools, paint, garbage cans, plumbing supplies, and whatever else they were looking for, most often the restrooms.

Soon after, Mom landed a position as a receptionist at the real estate office on the other side of the parking lot from Home Depot. Nobody there cared where my parents came from or if they went to church. The people who worked at the shopping center were practically all outsiders themselves, from cities such as Charleston. In Woodville, they claimed, you'd never be accepted if you weren't married to your cousin. Dad laughed at this, but Mom said it was an ignorant way to talk.

On weekends Dad and I got into the habit of spending our free time roaming the woods and fields, following trails made long ago by trappers

and hunters. He was forever stopping to take a picture of a lichen-covered boulder or a mossy log, a tangle of branches, a gnarled tree, a hawk or a crow in flight, but I didn't mind. I loved being in the woods with him.

Neither Mom nor Erica went with us. Mom had too much to do, she said, and Erica had no interest in the great outdoors. While Mom busied herself weaving, Erica sat nearby, re-reading the Little House on the Prairie books or playing with Little Erica. Sometimes she drew picture stories in her sketchpads; sometimes she painted with watercolors. She seemed perfectly content until the day ended. When night came, she grew fearful and clung to Mom. She still spoke of hearing scary whispers in the dark corners of her room.

On this particular day, a Saturday, Mom was working at the Realtor's office. Erica didn't want to stay at home alone, so she agreed to go with Dad and me. Although it was sunny, the wind was brisk, so we pulled on heavy sweaters and wrapped scarves around our necks. Erica dressed Little Erica in a sweater that matched hers and wrapped a bandanna around the doll's neck.

The wind ripped leaves from the trees and filled the air with whirling gold. Dad tried to capture the last of the foliage, but the color had peaked and many of the trees were bare.

His camera swinging from its strap, his hiking stick in hand, Dad chose a trail that led uphill, winding around boulders and outcrops of trees. After a while we came to a steep drop-off on one side of the trail, not exactly a cliff, but high enough to do serious harm, maybe even kill you, if you fell. Just looking down, down, down at the rocks far below was enough to make me step back toward the safe side of the trail, far from the edge.

Erica froze and clung to Dad's hand. "I'm scared of high places," she whispered. "Can we turn around and go home now?"

Leaving Dad to convince Erica that he wouldn't let her fall, I ran ahead, bounding from rock to rock. If I'd been looking where I was going, I might not have tripped on a tangle of roots half hidden in the fallen leaves, but the next thing I knew, I was flat on the ground on my belly. Struggling to get my breath, I looked through the weeds at a chimney pointing like a finger at the sky.

Scrambling to my feet, I followed an overgrown path to the ruins of an old log cabin that was slowly sinking into the earth. Overgrown with dying vines, shielded by brambles, its walls tilted and sagged. Part of the roof had

collapsed under the weight of a fallen tree, but the stone chimney was straight and true.

"Dad, Erica!" I yelled. "There's an old cabin here!"

They made their way through the weeds and undergrowth, Dad leading and Erica following, clutching her doll as if she might be in danger.

We walked around the cabin. Dad took dozens of pictures from every possible angle. He even got down on his stomach to get a different perspective.

"Can we go inside?" I asked.

"I don't see why not." Laughing, Dad knocked at the door. "Just in case."

When he pushed the door open, a buzzard flew out. Dad and I leaped out of its way, and Erica screamed.

"It's just a big bird," Dad told her. "A black buzzard. Nothing to be scared of."

The buzzard landed on a limb and hunched there, staring at us in disapproval. Suddenly he lifted his wings and took off, vanishing into the sky like a streak of black feathers shot from a bow.

"Quoth the buzzard, 'Nevermore,'" Dad said.

Erica looked worried. "Can we go home now?"

"Don't you want to go inside?" Dad asked.

"No." She peered into the darkness beyond the door. "Somebody might be hiding in there."

"Oh, come on." Dad took her hand and led her through the doorway, which was so low he had to stoop to go through it, and I followed close behind.

A little daylight filtered through the vines covering the windows, layers and layers of them twisted together like tangled ropes. The dirt floor reeked of mold. The air smelled of rot and decay and old ashes. I shivered in the damp cold. Suddenly I wanted to go back outside where the sun shone and the air was fresh.

"It smells bad in here," Erica whispered. "Please, Daddy, can we go home?"

"Let's explore first," Dad said. "You never know what you might find in an old place like this."

Although I would never have admitted it, I didn't want to be inside the cabin any more than Erica did. Cobwebs hung like curtains from the rafters; things scuttled in the shadows—mice, insects, I guessed. Weird funguses

grew in the dampness. What if we dislodged something and the rest of the roof caved in? We'd be buried alive.

While Erica waited in the doorway, I took a few steps into the cabin. Dad unearthed old bottles, broken pottery, chipped plates and cups—artifacts, he said, to take home and photograph. He was particularly pleased to come across the skulls and bones of several small animals—foxes, raccoons, squirrels, he guessed, that had sheltered and died there.

The little bones were too much for Erica. She retreated to a low stone wall on the edge of the woods and sat in the sun, her head close to her doll's head, having one of her imaginary conversations.

I didn't like the bones any more than my sister did. I didn't like the moldy smell or the damp cold either. In fact, I didn't like anything about the cabin, and I wished Dad would finish taking pictures and get out of there.

"I'm going outside," I told him, "to keep Erica company."

"Okay. I'll be done in here soon, just a few more minutes." With his back turned, he busied himself poking around in a broken-down cupboard, going through things that once belonged to a long-gone stranger.

I sat beside Erica on the wall, glad for the sun on my back and the smell of autumn leaves.

"I want to go home," she said.

"Me, too."

"I wish his camera battery would die."

"Yeah. How many pictures can he take, anyway? There's nothing in there but trash and broken stuff."

"And bones." Erica swung her legs harder, banging her heels. "I don't like bones."

While she smoothed Little Erica's hair, I watched a fuzzy brown caterpillar crawl slowly over the stones. He had a wide black stripe across his back, and I tried to remember if that meant a cold winter was coming.

The longer I sat on the wall, the more I noticed rustling noises in the woods behind us. An animal, I told myself, moving around in the fallen leaves and underbrush. I turned and peered into the trees, but saw nothing. My neck itched. Someone was there. Maybe Brody and his friends had followed us.

Erica moved closer to me. "Do you hear it now?" she asked.

"Hear what?"

“The whispering.” She dropped her voice so low I could barely hear her. “Air-ric-cah, Air-ric-cah—it’s calling me. Who is it? What does it want?”

Despite the sun, I felt as if a shadow had passed over us. Even though I couldn’t hear the whisper, I sensed that something was behind us in the woods, hidden, watching us. If I told Erica that, she’d be even more scared, so I said, “Nothing’s calling you, Erica. You’re imagining it.”

“You must be deaf.” Erica turned away from me and hugged the doll.

At last Dad came out of the cabin. Erica and I waited silently while he prowled around, taking pictures of anything and everything that stayed still long enough—glassless windows, splintered boards, the dark doorway, the chimney, tall weeds, tangles of thorns. He even lined up the things he’d found inside and took pictures of them arranged like still lifes on the wall. A little skull, a cracked plate, a few dead leaves, gloomy stuff.

Finally Dad said, “Come on, let’s go.” You’d think Erica and I, not him, were the ones who’d wanted to stay. He waved at his collection of junk. “We’ll come back later with a bag and get this stuff.”

Frankly, I hoped Dad would forget about coming back. I didn’t want those things in our house. They’d belonged to someone once. Someone most likely dead by now. The past clung to them like a stain you couldn’t wash away.

We headed down the trail toward home, with Erica and me just ahead of Dad. We went slowly, cautiously, watching our step on the steep trail. Sometimes it’s harder to go down a hill than to climb it.

Dinner did not go well that night. Mom was upset about her job. Receptionist, ha. A glorified typist, that’s all she was. Her boss was stupid and bigoted. He treated her like a servant—do this, do that, fix the coffee, go to Piggly Wiggly, pick up some pastries.

“Oh, you think that’s bad,” Dad muttered. “Try moving crates of stuff around a store the size of Home Depot and some manager with a high school education tells you you’re doing it wrong. Me doing it wrong. *Me* with an M.B.A. You think I like working there, wearing that big orange apron?”

I ignored them and tried to choke down the stew Mom had spent the afternoon cooking. When I complained that the meat was tough, Dad snapped that tough meat was all we could afford.

“It’s got fat in it,” Erica said.

“Well, then don’t eat it.” Dad pushed his chair back and left the table.

“Where are you going, Ted?” Mom asked. “You haven’t finished your dinner.”

“I’m an adult,” Dad said. “I don’t need permission to leave the table.”

We sat in silence and listened to him climb the stairs. The door to his den closed. He’d spend the rest of the night in there, photoshopping his pictures.

Mom stared at his unfinished dinner. Erica hugged her doll and gazed into space. No one said anything. The shadows of the old house gathered around us.

FIVE

Dad spent more and more time staring at his computer instead of working on his photography. Mom sat in front of her loom and watched the bare trees sway in the wind, but she didn't touch the rug she'd begun weeks earlier. She drank coffee and smoked, an old habit she'd gone back to. It calmed her nerves, she claimed.

She played Joan Baez albums and sang along with sad ballads about death and sorrow. She knew all the words.

Worst of all, she lost interest in cooking. Ever since the night Erica and I complained about the stew meat, she'd begun buying canned soup and canned stew and frozen dinners that she cooked in the microwave. We ate grilled cheese sandwiches at least three nights a week.

Once in a while she came home with a rotisserie chicken from Piggly Wiggly or a pizza from Joe's. As if that were a treat. Back in Fairfield, we went out for pizza at gourmet places. We'd never have eaten one of Joe's pizzas, full of salt and fat and topped off with runny sauce and rubbery cheese.

Nobody said anything about the food. Nobody, not even Erica, complained. We sat at the table and ate what was on our plates. Our conversation consisted of requests for salt or pepper.

Dad worried about money and the leaking roof and dripping faucets. When he wasn't at Home Depot, he wandered around the house making lists of repairs, but instead of doing them, he played games on his computer, something he'd always said was a waste of time.

Erica roamed the house with Little Erica. When I tried to talk to her, she had nothing to say. Every question produced an "I don't know" or a shrug of her shoulders.

Her conversations with the doll grew longer and more frequent. It made me both sad and angry to watch her living this strange imaginary existence. Sad because she used to be a happy, normal kid with real friends. Mad because she persisted in isolating herself from the family, which caused problems between Mom and Dad.

One day, before our parents came home from work, Erica and I were alone in the living room, trapped inside by a cold November rain. As usual, my sister was whispering to Little Erica. I slid closer to hear what she was saying, but she stopped talking and frowned at me as if I'd interrupted a private moment.

I was in a bad mood. I'd flunked another geography test. Someone left a sheet of notebook paper taped to my locker: "*Selene is gonna getcha.*" A boy named Caleb Rice tripped me in the hall and got a big laugh out of the kids who saw me take a tumble and drop all my books.

"That doll can't hear a thing you say," I said crossly.

"What do you know about dolls?"

"What everybody knows—everybody but you. They aren't alive."

"Think what you want." Erica smiled as if she knew things I didn't.

"Tell me one thing she can do that a real person does."

"She listens to me. Nobody else does. She talks to me, too. Nobody else does that either."

"Prove it," I said. "Make her say something."

"Little Erica only talks to me."

"You're such a liar." Disgusted with her and myself, I looked out the window. The van was coming down the driveway, its headlights slicing through the dark. "Mom and Dad are here."

Erica shrugged and started combing Little Erica's hair. "I wish I had a sister like *you* instead of a brother like Daniel." She spoke to the doll just loudly enough for me to hear.

The back door opened, and Mom and Dad came in, bringing the cold evening air with them. From the way they acted, neither speaking to nor looking at each other, I knew they'd been quarreling.

Back in the good old Connecticut days, they hardly ever argued, but now it happened so often they barely spoke to each other without one making the other angry. Usually it was the house. The leak in the roof had gotten worse, and we had to set buckets out to catch the rain. Cold drafts sneaked in through every crack. Dad had figured out the furnace, but the house was never warm. Mom said we lived in a barn.

They were too busy arguing to pay much attention to either Erica or me. I don't think they realized how miserable we were. Or how much they'd changed.

At dinner that night, I said, “Maybe we should go back to Connecticut. Not Fairfield but someplace cheaper, like Bridgeport.”

“Bridgeport?” Mom put down her fork and stared at me. “Do you really think we’d be happier in *Bridgeport*?”

“I don’t know.” I looked at her. “But the schools might be better.”

“Doubtful,” Dad said.

“They have Home Depots there,” I said. “Lowe’s, too.”

“Oh, that’s an inducement,” Dad said. “I could wear my nifty orange apron and show investment bankers where the restrooms are.”

“Never mind.” I left the table, only to hear raised voices behind me. Erica slunk past me and went to her room.

The days passed, rushing us toward winter. The house got messier. Books piled up in odd places. Newspapers and magazines littered floors and tabletops. Dirty dishes sat in the sink until we ran out of plates and then someone washed them. Nobody did the laundry until we needed clean underwear or socks. Dust balls collected under beds and furniture and in the corners of rooms.

I spent more time in the woods. The weather was turning colder, and the tall trees rocked and swayed over my head, making that sad sound bare branches make when the wind blows through them. I could see the mountains now, ridge after ridge, blue in the distance.

I didn’t worry about getting lost—I always carried a compass in my pocket—but sometimes the woods scared me. Maybe it was the solitude, maybe it was being in the presence of so many tall trees, but I’d find myself looking over my shoulder. I’d stop and listen. Branches sawed and scraped against each other. A twig snapped. The bushes rustled. I never saw anything, and I never told anyone, but sometimes I thought something was following me.

I’d think of the man—or whatever I’d seen—on the edge of the woods that night. I’d never seen him again, but what if he was following me, watching me from hidden places, waiting for the right opportunity to—to what? To kill me? Kidnap me? Harm me in some way?

I told myself not to be silly, it was just squirrels or birds rustling the bushes or the wind blowing high and lonesome over my head, but a little voice from a dark part of my mind kept whispering, *What if it’s something*

else? What if it's something dangerous? What if Brody wasn't lying about the things in the woods?

One afternoon I took the wrong trail and came out of the woods two or three miles down the road from our house. It was already late, and while I walked, the sun dropped below the top of the mountains. Soon I was stumbling along in the dark, wishing I'd brought a flashlight, wishing I had a dog. I'd asked Dad if we could go to animal rescue and get one, but he said we couldn't afford an extra mouth to feed. He'd looked so depressed, I never asked again.

In the thick dark of the woods, I heard the rustling, snuffling sounds of a large animal nosing in the fallen leaves. I smelled something disgusting—rotten leaves, mildew, decay. A bear, it must be a bear. I'd seen black bears on my hikes, but never so near that I could smell them.

Just as I was about to run, I heard a car behind me. I moved to the edge of the road. An old Ford slowed to a stop. The driver rolled down his window.

"What are you doing out here all by yourself?" he asked. "It's getting dark, and look at you, wearing jeans and a black jacket. You're lucky I saw you."

I backed away. The man was a stranger, and I was alone on a dark road. He could grab me and throw me into his car and drive away.

Which was worse—being kidnapped or being attacked by a bear?

"You must be the kid who lives in the old Estes place," the man said. "You want a ride home?"

I shook my head. My feet were tangled up in vines, and I was scared that I was trapped. "That's okay. I like to walk," I stammered.

"In the dark? Who knows who might come along and get you?" Then he laughed. "Oh, I see, you think I'm going to get you. Is that it?"

He opened the car door. The overhead light came on, and I saw an old man with white hair. "I'm Mr. O'Neill from up the road a ways. I know your dad, Ted Anderson. Nice fella. Helps me carry stuff to my car at Home Depot. Come on, get in before you get yourself run over."

Mr. O'Neill looked harmless. He knew Dad's name and where he worked. "Thanks," I said. Lurching out of the vines, I slid into the car.

"What were you doing way out here?" he asked.

"Hiking," I told him. "I took the wrong turn on one of the trails."

“Lucky I came along. You won’t catch me traipsing around in the woods all by my lonesome. Hasn’t anybody told you about Bloody Bones?”

“Bloody Bones?” I laughed. “That’s just a silly old scary story about a monster coming up the steps one at a time to get you.”

“That’s not the real story. Not by a long shot. There’s a lot more to Bloody Bones than that.” He peered at me. “You ever come across an old, fallen-down cabin up on a hill?”

“My dad and my sister and I went there once. Dad took pictures of it.”

“Well, that cabin once belonged to Old Auntie. She was a conjure woman. You know what that is?”

“A witch?”

He nodded. “Well, Old Auntie lived by herself, save for this big old razorback hog she kept as a pet. She took that mean, ugly critter with her everywhere she went. Some folks said that hog walked on his hind legs like a man, and I believe he did.”

He pulled into our driveway and let the engine idle. “Well, one day Old Auntie couldn’t find her hog anywhere. She searched high, she searched low—no sign of him. So she got out her conjure pot and made a potion she could see things in. And you know what she saw?”

I shook my head.

“She saw this nasty old feller that lived up in the mountains. He’d been hunting razorback hogs. One of the hogs he caught was her pet. That sneaking, thieving rascal slaughtered all the hogs and skinned them and carved off their meat and threw what was left in a heap. In that pile, Old Auntie saw her hog’s bald head and bloody bones. So she cast a spell to summon him back from the dead. His bones put themselves together and rose up on their hind feet. His skull jumped on top of the bones, and off he danced. On the way to the sneaking, thieving rascal’s house, he got some claws from a dead bear, some teeth from a dead panther, and a tail from a dead raccoon.”

Mr. O’Neill paused to look at his watch. “It’s later than I thought. Guess I’ll have to make a long story a mite shorter. The hog killed that lying, thieving rascal—tore him clean apart with the panther’s teeth and ate him up. Then he dug his grave with the bear’s claws and brushed the ground smooth with the raccoon’s tail. He left that lying, thieving rascal’s bones up there in the rocks all by himself. Folks round here say you can still hear him howling and moaning and screaming when the wind blows just right.”

Even though I knew it was just a story, one I'd heard around a campfire at Boy Scout camp, Mr. O'Neill had a way of making it sound real. The dark woods and the lonely road and the wind swaying the treetops added a lot to the telling, or maybe it was because I was already half terrified, but the old man definitely had a knack for scaring people.

Trying to hide my fear, I asked him what happened to the hog.

"Well, he dressed himself in that lying, thieving rascal's overalls and went home to Old Auntie, raccoon tail and all."

He paused a moment. "From then on, he became known as Bloody Bones. There's not a child in this valley who's not scared of him."

"It's just an old story kids tell," I muttered, but my heart beat a little harder than normal at the idea of Bloody Bones. Suppose he was what I'd heard and smelled. What if he was just about to pounce on me when Mr. O'Neill came along and saved my life?

"And I tell you Bloody Bones still roams the woods," Mr. O'Neill said. "He got a liking for human flesh when he ate that lying, thieving rascal."

"Oh, sure." I tried hard not to look past the headlights into the unknowable dark surrounding the car. If Bloody Bones hid in the trees, I didn't want to see him.

"Don't you *Oh, sure* me, son." Mr. O'Neill looked hard at me. "To this day, people have a way of disappearing in these woods."

He leaned across me and opened the door. "You mind getting out here? I'm a little late for an appointment in town. Or would you rather I drive you all the way home?"

I sat in the brightly lit car. The headlights faded into the night a few feet up the driveway. The woods were dark, and the wind was blowing through treetops as bare as bones. Who knew what was out there?

"I walked pretty far today," I said in a low voice. "And I'm really tired. Would you mind driving me to the house?"

Mr. O'Neill chuckled and said he'd be glad to, seeing as how I was too tired to walk up the driveway. I could almost hear quotation marks around *tired*.

When the car stopped at the end of the driveway, I saw my sister looking out the window at us. She held Little Erica up so she could see, too.

"That your little sister?" he asked.

I nodded.

“She’s a pretty little thing,” he said. “Take good care of her, son. Don’t let her go wandering off like . . .” His voice trailed off.

“Like Selene?”

“Oh, you heard that story, did you?”

“From Brody Mason.”

Mr. O’Neill sighed. “He’s a sad case, that boy. His mama died a few months back, and he and his daddy are having a hard time. No telling what he’ll tell you, but in the case of Selene, it’s the honest-to-God truth.”

“Did she really disappear?”

“Yes, she did. No one found her. No one knows what happened to her.” He paused a moment. “Lord, that was fifty years ago.”

“Did you know her?”

He nodded. “I knew the whole family. She and my daughter Eleanor were best friends. She played at our house or Eleanor played at her house almost every day. It just about broke Eleanor’s heart when Selene vanished.”

“What happened to the Estes family afterward?”

He sighed. “They moved about a year later. By then, they knew she wasn’t coming back. We never knew where they went. After what happened, I reckon they didn’t want anything to do with this place.”

I had more questions, but Mr. O’Neill looked at his watch again and said, “Time for me to hit the road, son.”

I got out of the car. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Glad to do it. Say hi to your dad for me.”

When I opened the kitchen door, Mom asked who brought me home.

“Mr. O’Neill. He knows Dad.”

“He’s a nice old fellow,” Dad said. “I enjoy talking to him at work.”

Mom frowned at me. “What have I told you about taking rides with strangers?”

“He wasn’t a stranger, Mom. You heard Dad. He knows him.”

“But *you* didn’t know him,” Mom said. “He could have been lying. He could have kidnapped you. Promise me you’ll never do that again!”

“Now, Martha,” Dad said. “We aren’t in Connecticut anymore.”

“No, we certainly aren’t.” With that, Mom yanked a frozen pizza out of the oven and called Erica to the table.

I was dying to ask Dad if Mr. O’Neill had ever told him about Bloody Bones, or if he’d talked to him about Selene Estes, but Erica was sitting

across the table, picking at her food and smearing dabs on Little Erica's face. She had enough trouble sleeping without imagining Bloody Bones sneaking up the stairs to get her.

I figured it was best to keep quiet and eat my dinner. I'd ask Dad later, when he was alone.

But after dinner Dad secluded himself in his den. Mom stood at a living room window, a cigarette in her hand, and stared into the darkness. Erica sat on the couch and watched Mom. "Will you read to me, Mommy?" she asked.

"Not right now, Erica." Mom left the window and went to the kitchen.

My sister and I looked at each other. "She's crying," Erica said.

I sat down beside her. "I know."

"Nobody's happy anymore," Erica said.

"Yeah, I've noticed."

"It's this house. We never should have come here." She leaned toward me. "Do you ever feel like something bad will happen?"

I could have said *All the time, every minute,* but I kept my thoughts to myself. "Like what?" I asked.

Erica gazed past me into the fire blazing on the hearth. "I don't know, just something." She smoothed Little Erica's hair. "Those whispers," she added. "They're getting louder. They keep me awake at night. Are you sure you never hear them?"

"Like I told you, it's just the wind or the floorboards creaking. Old houses make lots of noises."

"The wind doesn't say people's names."

Mom came back and sat down beside Erica. Picking up *The Middle Moffat*, she asked, "What chapter are we on?"

As Mom began to read, I studied her face. Her eyes were red, and so was her nose. I wanted to ask her what was going on between her and Dad. Were they getting divorced? But I knew she'd say, *Don't be silly, Daniel. Nothing's wrong. Everyone has arguments sometimes.* That's the problem with families—too many things no one wants to talk about.

Since I wasn't interested in the Moffat family, I left Erica and Mom snuggled under a blanket and climbed the stairs to the second floor. Down the hall, a strip of light shone under Dad's door. I heard explosions and gunfire, which meant he was playing one of his war games.

Downstairs, Mom and Erica laughed about something Rufus Moffat said.

I’d never felt so alone in all my life.

The Dolly

It begins with a whisper in the dark, always the girl's name, always long and airy. The old woman blows it through keyholes and cracks. She guides it upstairs and down until it finds the girl's ear and nestles there. Air-ric-cah . . . No one can hear it but the girl.

The girl has trouble sleeping, she's fearful, she withdraws and spends most of her time with the dolly. Perfect. The old woman gives the dolly a sweet voice. The dolly uses her sweet voice to tell the girl she loves her, but no one else does. She tells the girl she understands how she feels, but no one else does. Especially her brother. He hates her, doesn't she know that? Hasn't she always known that?

The girl tells the doll how unhappy she is. The children at school are mean to her. They laugh at her clothes, they laugh at the way she talks. On the playground, they gather in groups and turn their backs. Her brother is mean to her too. Her parents pick on her. They love her brother more than they love her. The doll agrees with everything the girl tells her.

One day, when winter is closing in and the nights are long, the dolly tells the girl she wants to go to the woods. The girl is afraid of the woods, she never goes there. She stays inside by the fire where it's warm. She reads to the dolly, she talks to the dolly, she shares her unhappiness with the dolly.

But the dolly insists. She has secrets she will share with the girl, but only if they are outside in the woods where no one can hear and no one can see. "If you really love me," the dolly says, "you'll do as I ask. If you refuse me, I'll stop talking to you. I'll be what your brother says I am—a lump of plastic. Is that what you want?"

Of course it's not what the girl wants. She puts on her parka and her hat and her gloves, and she goes out into the cold with the dolly. The wind blows her name through the air. It's taken up by a flock of crows and passed on into the darkness—Air-ric-cah, Air-ric-cah . . .

The dolly shows her a path. "This must be a secret," she warns the girl. "You mustn't tell anyone what we see or do here."

And so it continues.

SIX

As the days passed, Erica and I spent less and less time together. While she spent her afternoons reading and drawing and playing with her stupid doll, I roamed the woods, exploring trails and searching for hawks. Thanks to my binoculars and Peterson's *Field Guide to Birds of North America*, I could identify red-tailed hawks, sharp-shinned hawks, and Cooper's hawks. I knew the difference between black buzzards and turkey buzzards. Once, I'd even seen a bald eagle.

At first I tried to persuade Erica to come with me, but she'd said no so often, I gave up asking. Fine. Let her mope around the house with Little Erica. It was obvious she'd rather talk to a doll than to me. Pretty insulting, I thought.

On the school bus, we sat next to each other, but we didn't talk to each other and no one talked to us. Erica stared out the window, as if she expected to see something in the woods. I stared straight ahead, trying not to listen to the other kids laughing at the snobs from Connecticut.

One day after school I left the house in such a hurry I forgot my binoculars. I'd been watching a red-tailed hawk for a few days, and I needed the binoculars to see him in the woods. Annoyed at myself, I hurried home just in time to see my sister disappear into the woods on the other side of the house.

I stopped where I was, puzzled. Erica hated the woods—what was she up to? Maybe I should follow her and find out. Hadn't Mr. O'Neill told me to keep an eye on her?

Keeping a good distance between us, I walked as silently as if Erica were a bird I didn't want to frighten away. She'd taken a narrow path that meandered through the woods like a deer trail, circling around boulders and trees. Every now and then she stopped and stared into the underbrush as if she were looking for something.

Finally she came to a clearing and sat on a fallen tree. Cuddling her doll, she began whispering, just as if someone was with her—not the doll, but a person. I peered into the bushes around her, but I didn't see anyone. At least I don't *think* I did—it was more like I sensed a presence.

But no, that was crazy. All I heard was a whisper of wind prying leaves from branches. All I saw were shadows. I backed away from Erica. If she wanted to sit in the woods and hold imaginary conversations, let her. Why waste my afternoon spying on her?

Without making a sound, I crept away, retrieved my binoculars, and went in search of the red-tailed hawk.

By the time I came home, it was almost dark. Erica was sitting on the couch reading to Little Erica, exactly what she'd been doing when I'd left the house.

I lit the fire and sat beside her. "Have you been here all afternoon?"

She looked up from her book. "Of course. Where else would I be?"

"It's such a nice day, sunny and everything, I thought you might have gone outside to play for a while."

The doll regarded me with her usual blank stare, but Erica frowned at me. "You know I hate the woods."

I was about to accuse her of lying but then decided against it. Maybe I'd follow her again tomorrow, just in case I'd missed something.

Suddenly Erica leaned toward me and asked one of her typical out-of-nowhere questions. "Do you ever have secrets, Daniel?"

"Sometimes. Why? Do you?"

"Maybe," she said softly. She smiled and gazed into the fire.

"What do you mean 'maybe'? Either you do or you don't."

Instead of answering, Erica began reading to the doll again. "'Once upon a time a woodcutter had two children, a boy named Hansel and a girl named Gretel—'"

"About your secret," I said, "the one you may or may not have. Has it got anything to do with the woods?"

"I'm reading to Little Erica now," my sister said. "Don't interrupt me."

I wanted to snatch the book out of her hands and throw it into the corner and hurl the doll after it. Instead, I left my sister and the doll on the couch and went to the kitchen to make myself a peanut butter sandwich. As I ate, I heard Erica reading "'Nibble nibble, mousekin'" in a scary witch's voice, much deeper and raspier than her normal voice. I almost got up to see if someone else was in the living room.

The Secret

The old woman waits in the woods, but you wouldn't recognize her. She has taken the form of the girl in the cabin. She watches Erica sit down on a log, just where the dolly tells her to sit. Good. The girl is biddable. She does as she's told.

The old woman comes closer. She smiles shyly and waits for Erica to notice her.

"Who are you?" Erica is startled, but not afraid, as she would be if the old woman had come as herself.

The old woman wears a gray plaid dress with a round collar. Her hair is red and curly. Her face is sweet and sad.

"I come to be your friend." The old woman speaks in a soft, childish voice that soothes the girl.

"I don't have any friends," Erica whispers.

"You got yourself one now." The girl sits on the log beside Erica. "That's a mighty pretty dolly you got. Can I hold her?"

Erica holds the dolly tighter. "She's very special."

"Please." The girl reaches for the dolly. "I ain't never seen a dolly so pretty as that."

Erica looks distrustful, but the dolly whispers, "Let her hold me, it's all right."

Reluctantly, Erica hands the little girl her dolly.

"Oh, I wish I had me a dolly like this one," the little girl says.

Rocking the doll in her arms, she croons a little song. The tune is familiar, but Erica can't make out the words.

Later, when Erica goes home, she doesn't remember what happened in the woods. It's a secret, even from herself.

After that, the old woman in her little-girl shape meets Erica in the woods every day. She tells her she lives with her sweet old auntie in a pretty little cabin on the tippity top of a hill. "She loves me ever so much," the old woman says in the little-girl voice. "More'n anybody ever did."

"More than your mommy and daddy?" Erica asks.

“My mama and daddy never loved me. They made me work hard at chores and beat me black-and-blue and made me sleep on the floor by the fireplace ’cause I was so bad.”

“My parents would never do that.”

“Oh yes, they would. Parents never love their little ones. They can’t wait to get rid of them. You’ll see. One day they’ll get fed up with you and start treating you bad, just the way mine did.”

Erica stares at her, and the little girl smiles. Things are going well. Erica believes everything the girl tells her. “They already love your brother more than you.”

“It’s true,” Erica says. “They’ve always loved Daniel best.”

“My auntie’s keeping an eye on you,” the little girl says in her sweet little, false little voice. “She loves you even though you don’t know it yet, and she aims to rescue you and bring you to her cabin, where me and you will live like sisters.”

The little girl pats Erica’s hand. “Come live with us afore they start into beating you and scolding you and making you sleep by the fire. Why, they could kill you dead one night.”

Erica draws back a little. “You’re scaring me.”

The little girl says, “There ain’t nothing to be scared of. Come away with me, and I’ll keep you safe.”

“Will I have to go to school?”

“School? No indeed. Old Auntie got no use for school. She’ll teach you all you need to know.”

Erica nods her head. Yes, she’ll come with the little girl. And stay with her and Old Auntie. And never go to school again. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow. But soon.

The old woman sees the brother watching from the woods. He can’t see her, but he knows someone is there. “I must go,” she whispers to Erica, and slips away into the woods.

SEVEN

The next day, I left the house with my binoculars and my bird book, but instead of going to the woods, I hid in the tall weeds near the house and waited. It was a colder day and windy, but in a few minutes Erica ran out the back door, darted across the yard, and disappeared into the woods.

She took the same path, turned off into the clearing, and sat on the fallen tree. Her bright blue scarf blew in the wind, and her red hair swirled.

Hiding behind a tall maple, I watched her closely. Once in a while she whispered to the doll, but for the most part she neither moved nor spoke. She sat still and stared into the woods—waiting, I thought, but for what? Definitely a girl with secrets. No "maybes" about it.

The wind yanked the last of the leaves from the trees and sent them flying through the air. They rustled and sighed and sank to the ground in brown and yellow heaps. Some settled in Erica's hair and on her shoulders. Others landed on Little Erica.

Nothing distracted my sister. Not the falling leaves. Not the squirrel chattering on a branch over her head. Not the crow cawing from the top of a dead tree. She sat so still, I thought she must be holding her breath.

Suddenly she stood up and took a step or two toward the dead tree. She held the doll tightly and whispered to her.

While I watched Erica, I glimpsed a shadow drifting toward her through the trees—dark and formless, like a wisp of fog or smoke. I couldn't tell what it was—an old woman, a little girl, an animal—something small and dangerous, I could sense it. Behind it was something else, something worse, a shadowy, bony thing, taller than a man.

"Erica!" I shouted. "Stop, don't go near it! Run!"

My sister turned to me. "Daniel! What are you doing here?"

The shadow, or whatever it was, vanished, but I grabbed Erica and started pulling her away. "What's wrong with you? Can't you see? There was something there!"

"Let me go!" she screamed. "Let me go!"

"No. You're coming home, right now!"

"My doll," she cried, "my doll."

Little Erica lay on the ground where my sister had dropped her, her face in the leaves.

"I have to get her!" Erica twisted and turned, kicking me, flailing her arms. "She wants her! She'll take her!"

"Who wants her?" I yelled. "Who'll take her?"

Erica didn't answer, but she struggled even harder to get away from me, crying and screaming. Holding her was like holding a cat that doesn't want to be held. She didn't have claws or sharp teeth, but she managed to bite me twice and scratch my face.

But I didn't let her go. And I didn't pick up the doll.

Out of the woods at last, I saw Mom and Dad getting out of the van. When they saw me hauling Erica through the weeds, they hurried toward us.

"What's going on?" Dad shouted. "Are you all right?"

With a burst of strength, Erica broke away and ran to Mom and began a sobbing account of what happened. "I was playing in the woods," she cried, "and all of a sudden Daniel grabbed me and started dragging me home. He said I wasn't allowed to be in the woods. He made me leave Little Erica there—she's lying on the ground all by herself."

Dad and Mom looked at each other. "You take care of Daniel," Mom said to him. "I'll get Erica into the house. She's hysterical."

"No." Erica began struggling again. "I have to get Little Erica. I can't leave her there!"

"It's almost dark," Dad said. "We'll get the doll tomorrow."

"No, no! I'll never see her again." Erica thrashed about wildly, more like a cat than before.

"Take her to the house, Ted," Mom cried. "I can't hold her!"

Dad got a firm grip on Erica, picked her up, and carried her toward the house. Her shrieks finally stopped when the back door closed behind Dad.

Mom turned to me. "What's this about? Why wouldn't you let her get the doll?"

"There was something in the woods, something dark and scary." Words tumbled out of my mouth. I didn't think about what I was saying. I didn't try to stop myself. "I had to get her away from it."

Mom looked at me as if I'd lost my mind. "What are you talking about?"

"I don't know. I saw it. I was scared. I thought it was going to grab Erica. She was just standing there, like she was paralyzed or something."

Mom put her hands on my shoulders and gave me a little shake. “Daniel, how often do I need to tell you? No one is going to take you or Erica. No one is going to disappear.”

I took a deep breath and tried to calm down. I wanted to believe Mom. I hadn’t seen anything in the woods. Neither had Erica. It was all my imagination. Selene Estes had disappeared, but she hadn’t been taken by Bloody Bones. He was a legend, he wasn’t real. I couldn’t have seen him.

But no matter what I told myself, I knew I’d seen something. I couldn’t explain it. I didn’t know what it was, but it had been there.

After Erica cried herself to sleep, I talked Dad into going to the woods with flashlights to look for the doll. I didn’t want to leave the house, but I felt bad about leaving Little Erica in the woods. That doll was just a hunk of plastic to me, but to Erica she was almost a real person.

When we opened the back door, a gust of wind blew leaves into the kitchen. They skittered across the floor and settled in corners as if they’d been waiting to come inside.

It took all of Dad’s strength to pull the door shut behind us. The night was biting cold. An almost full moon lit the field.

At the edge of the woods, we turned on our flashlights. The wind tossed the trees, and their shadows danced over the path, crossing and crisscrossing the ground, making it hard to see.

I stayed close to Dad and aimed the flashlight at the ground. Nothing looked familiar. It was as if we’d taken a different path, one you could find only at night. I heard noises in the undergrowth. I imagined creatures you’d never see in daylight scurrying through the dead leaves. I kept my eyes on the path so I wouldn’t see anything in the shadows on either side of me.

After we’d walked for half an hour or so, Dad stopped. His flashlight probed the dark, picking out one tree, then another. An owl was caught in the beam for a moment, its eyes huge and shining. Without giving me time to identify him, he flew soundlessly into the woods.

“Are you sure we’re going the right way?” Dad asked.

“I think maybe we passed the clearing,” I admitted. “I don’t remember it being this far.”

“I told you we should wait until morning to look for that doll.”

I shone my flashlight behind us. “It all looks the same in the dark.”

“So I noticed,” Dad said.

We turned around and walked back the way we'd come. Dad studied every tree, every boulder, every fallen log.

He asked the same questions over and over. "Is this it? Does that tree look familiar? Do you think we're close?"

My answer was always the same. "I don't know."

After a while, Dad came up with new questions. "Did you scare Erica on purpose? Why didn't you stop and let her get the doll? Were you teasing her? Bullying her?"

"No," I said. "No. I saw something, Dad. I thought—"

He shook his head. "You *saw* something. All this because you *saw* something. What's wrong with you? I've been all over these woods and never seen anything out of the ordinary."

Bumbling and stumbling ahead of me, Dad thrashed at dry weeds and dead vines with a stick. Everything was my fault—my fault Erica was hysterical, my fault the doll was missing, my fault we couldn't find the clearing, my fault we were wandering around in the woods freezing our butts off.

"I give up," Dad said. "The doll's gone, and your sister is heartbroken. You should feel really great about that."

Dad had never talked to me this way. He got mad so easily now. So did Mom. Erica was unhappy and secretive and strange. I was miserable in school. And lonely. Nothing was right.

Without speaking to each other, Dad and I left the woods and trudged across the field. In the cold and windy dark, the house looked warm and inviting. Lights shone from the windows, smoke rose from the chimney, but it was like a mirage. Up close, inside the house, the warmth and happiness vanished.

No one spoke at breakfast. Mom slammed bowls of cold cereal down in front of Erica and me. She and Dad had already eaten and were getting ready to leave for work.

Before she left, Mom hugged Erica. "Please don't look so sad, sweetie. You and Daniel can look for Little Erica when you get home from school. In the daylight, you're sure to find her."

Erica didn't say anything. She sat with her head down, her cereal untouched, tears trickling down her cheeks.

“Erica, I promise I’ll find her,” I said. “I don’t know what got into me. I thought—”

“That’s enough, Daniel,” Mom said. “Forget about what you thought you saw in the woods. You’re just making matters worse.”

“But Mom—”

Outside, Dad blew the horn, already annoyed.

“I have to leave.” Mom grabbed her purse and fumbled with the zipper on her parka. The horn blew again.

“All right, all right,” Mom muttered. To me she said, “Find the doll. Erica’s very upset. She cried all night.”

The door slammed shut, and the van drove away, its tires spraying gravel. I took Erica’s untouched cereal and put our bowls and glasses in the sink. “We have to leave in ten minutes,” I reminded her.

She nodded, but she didn’t move from the table.

“Aren’t you going to brush your teeth?”

No response. I did what I had to do in the bathroom and returned to find Erica sitting exactly where I’d left her.

I took her parka and mine off the hook. “Here, put this on.”

Erica got up slowly and allowed me to help her with her jacket. “You should at least comb your hair,” I told her. “You look terrible.”

“Who cares what I look like?” Erica pulled on her mittens and a knit cap Mom had made for her. “Everyone at school hates me.”

“Where are your schoolbooks?”

“I don’t know.”

I looked around and saw her book bag on the floor by the front door. From its weight, I knew her books were inside. “Did you do your homework?”

“No.” Erica slipped the straps over her shoulder and followed me outside. The wind was cold and damp and smelled of winter.

Silently we walked down the driveway. Now that the trees were bare, we could see farther into the woods, all the way to the road.

“Erica,” I said, “did you see anything in the woods? A sort of dark shape, a shadow maybe?”

“No.”

“But you were sitting on that log, staring into the woods as if you were talking to somebody. And then you got up and walked straight toward whatever it was.”

She shook her head. “That’s what *you* thought I was doing.”

“Well, what were you doing?”

“Nothing.”

I wanted to shake the truth out of her, but I took a deep breath, counted to ten, and finally said, “You told me you had a secret. Is it something you do in the woods? Someone you see? Or talk to? Do you still hear whispers in the dark?”

Erica looked at me at last, her pale face closed tight. “A secret is something you don’t tell anyone, Daniel. That’s what it means.”

“Does Mom know?”

“I just told you. It’s only a secret if you don’t tell anyone.” With that, Erica ran down the driveway ahead of me.

I picked up a stone and threw it into the woods as far as I could. Thonk. It hit a tree and bounced off. I was frustrated. No matter what I asked, Erica would not give me an answer. Somehow, my seven-year-old sister was getting the best of me.

I caught up with her at the end of the driveway. Shivering in the wind, we waited silently for the bus. I’d given up talking to her. What was the point?

EIGHT

As soon as we boarded the bus, Mrs. Plummer noticed Erica's mood. "What's the matter, sweetie? You get up on the wrong side of the bed or something?"

Or something, I thought.

"It's my doll, Little Erica, you know—the one I told you about. My brother made me leave her in the woods, and now she's gone."

Mrs. Plummer turned around and looked directly at me. "Why on earth did you do something like that?"

As usual, I was being blamed. "It's kind of complicated," I said. "I thought, well, I won't tell you what I thought. It's dumb, and you wouldn't believe me. Let's just say I made a mistake, and I'm really sorry and I'll find the doll after school."

"He won't find her no matter how hard he looks." Erica turned her face to the window and pressed her nose against the glass. "She's been took," Erica whispered to herself in a voice so low I scarcely heard her.

Mrs. Plummer looked at me in the rearview mirror. "What makes you think I won't believe you?"

"My parents don't." She was slowing down to pick up Brody. With him getting on the bus, I couldn't tell her what I saw.

"Tell me later," Mrs. Plummer told me.

As usual, Brody gave me a nasty look as he walked past. He was heading for a seat at the back of the bus where he and his friends sat.

Ignoring him, I looked straight ahead, and Erica looked out the window. We rode in silence all the way to school.

My day was no worse than usual. A B-minus on a history report because I'd gotten a date wrong. A bloody nose in basketball—an accident of course. And so on and so on.

The bus ride home was worse than usual because Erica still refused to speak to me. Without her to talk to, I had to listen to rude comments about my sweater, my haircut, my shoes, and who knows what. I wondered how the kids on the bus had entertained themselves before I'd had the bad luck to move to Woodville.

After Brody got off, Mrs. Plummer glanced at us in the rearview mirror once or twice, but she didn't have anything to say until she stopped at the end of our driveway. "I hope you find the doll, but be quick about it. It gets dark early, and I don't want you getting lost in the woods."

She shut the door and drove away, heading home, I guessed, to her husband and kids. We stood at the side of the road and looked down the driveway. The trees were a tunnel of darkness already.

"Let's go straight to the woods and look for your doll," I said.

"She won't be there," Erica said in the flat little voice she'd been using all day.

"Yes, she will." I took her hand to hurry her along, but she pulled away and ran ahead.

I chased her through the field's tall weeds and into the woods. In a few minutes I came to the dead tree, the clearing, and the fallen log. How had Dad and I missed it last night?

Erica waited for me, empty-handed. "She's not here."

"She must be." I ran around looking in piles of fallen leaves, under bushes, behind logs, even leaving the clearing to search the woods.

Erica stayed where she was, her arms folded across her chest, shivering.

"I don't understand it." I pointed to the place where I'd last seen Little Erica. "She was right there." I kicked at the leaves, scattering them, thinking the doll had to be under them.

Erica hugged herself as if she still held the doll in her arms. "She's been took."

"'Took'? That's how the kids in Woodville talk, not you and me. We say 'taken.' And besides, who took her?"

"Selene." The name dropped from Erica's lips like a stone. "The girl who lives on the tippity top of a hill with her old auntie."

"Are you crazy or just a liar? Selene disappeared fifty years ago. Nobody's seen her since."

Honestly, I wasn't as sure as I tried to sound. My feeling of being watched, the darkness of the woods surrounding the house, Erica's behavior, the tension between Mom and Dad, the unhappiness we'd all sunk into—everything was wrong. Maybe, just maybe, it all tied in with Selene Estes. Or something else—I didn't know what.

My brain was muddled. My hands and nose were cold, and I wanted to go home, light the fire, and play games on my iPad.

Erica stared into the woods, at the very spot where I'd seen, or thought I'd seen, the shadow thing.

"You saw something yesterday," I said. "I know it."

"Suppose I did?" Erica's pale face looked spooky in the dim light, her eyes too big for her face and shadowed with dark circles.

"What did you see?" I stood over her. "I want to know!"

"It's a secret. I made a promise, I—" She was crying now.

Angry and frustrated by her silent, secret ways, I pulled her to her feet and shook her. Not hard, just a little. "I'm serious. There's something going on, and I need to know what it is."

"Let me go, let me go!" Erica struggled to get away. It was just like the day before, and I was fed up.

"Tell me!" I shouted. "Tell me the truth, you little liar!" I let go of her and shoved her so hard she fell on her back in the leaves.

Scrambling to her feet, she glared at me like a wild thing. Her hair hung in her face; leaves clung to her jacket. "I hate you, Daniel! No matter what you do, you can't make me tell. Never never never!"

She spun around and dashed into the woods.

"Come back here!" I yelled.

I ran after her, slipping and sliding on fallen leaves, tripping on roots hidden beneath the leaves. A branch she'd brushed aside flew back and hit my eye. Its thorns clawed my face.

Smarting from pain, I shouted, "Go on, then, stupid! Run. You'll be sorry if you get lost and it's dark and cold and . . ." I stopped yelling because I couldn't hear her crashing through the bushes anymore.

Fine, I thought. *I brought her home yesterday. I'm not doing it again. Let her find her own way back, maybe it'll teach her a lesson.*

I turned away and followed the path back to the house. It was practically dark, and a cold wind hissed through the dry weeds. Erica wouldn't stay long in the woods. She probably knew a shortcut. When I got home, she'd be there, sitting on the couch, smirking because she'd beaten me. Mom would never know I'd let my sister run off into the woods without me.

The Taking

The old woman returns to the clearing and waits for Erica and her hateful brother. She leaves the dolly hidden in the woods near her cabin. She has another use for it.

She hears them coming before she sees them. Their voices are loud and angry.

The hateful brother can't believe the doll is gone, but Erica knows who took it. *That girl,* she tells him. *The one who lives with her auntie on the tippity top of a hill.* They fight, and the hateful brother pushes his sister. She falls backward into the leaves. Now she knows he hates her. She must find the cabin and the girl.

She scrambles to her feet and runs away from him. The old woman makes sure he gives up and goes home.

She lets Erica run until she's too tired to go farther. She watches Erica sink down on the ground and cry. She waits until the trees thicken with shadows. The wind blows harder, its breath as cold as death. Bloody Bones snuffles and snorts in the dead leaves, looking for grubs or voles, anything juicy or crunchy.

Erica hears him coming closer, step by shuffling step. She whimpers and cries and curls herself into a ball.

When the old woman is sure that Erica cannot run or put up a fight, she steps out of the woods in her own shape. Her ragged cloak billows around her gnarled body. Strands of white hair stream across her bony face. She stands over Erica, leaning on her staff, older than old, crueler than cruel, as wicked as the devil hisself.

"Air-ric-cah," she croons. "Air-ric-cah, come to Auntie."

Erica looks up. The old woman takes her arm and pulls her roughly to her feet. "You belong to me now. No one wants you but me, no one loves you but me. They've forgot all about you, and you've forgot all about them."

Smiling to herself, the old woman drags Erica through the woods to her cabin. She has what she wants.

NINE

When I slammed into the kitchen, Erica wasn't there. I called out, just in case, but there's something about an empty house. You always know when you're alone.

I pictured her taking her time coming home, sulking, mad, hoping I'd worry about her. Little brat. I couldn't stand my sister anymore. I was sick of her. Sick of her scenes. Sick of the doll. I hoped we'd never find it.

I smeared a thick layer of peanut butter on a piece of bread, poured myself a glass of cider, and went to my room to play games on my iPad. But for some reason I couldn't concentrate. The silence of the house pressed against my ears. A clock ticked. The refrigerator turned off and on. A gust of wind rattled the windowpanes. Noises you never heard except when there were no other noises.

I closed my iPad and went to the window. Where was Erica? I walked down the hall to her room. Maybe she'd been hiding there all the time, playing a trick on me. Yes, that must be it. She'd beaten me home, run upstairs, and hidden. It was just the sort of prank she'd pull.

Fully expecting to see her sitting on her bed, laughing at me, I flung open the door and flicked on the light. A row of stuffed animals sat on the window seat, staring at me with shiny round eyes.

I called my sister's name. I looked under her bed and in the closet, expecting her to jump out and scare me. No Erica.

As I turned to leave the room, I saw the van's headlights coming down the driveway. With a half-formed hope that Erica would be with Mom and Dad, I ran down the back stairs to the kitchen and opened the door before Dad had a chance to fumble with his key.

"Well, thanks, buddy." Dad brushed past me and set a case of wine down on the counter with a thud.

Mom was right behind him, balancing a stack of carryout cartons from Lucky's Chinese Restaurant. "No pizza tonight. Moo goo gai pan for you and me and Erica."

"And General Tso's chicken for me." Dad turned to the cupboard to get dinner plates. "Go fetch Erica so we can eat before the won ton soup gets

cold."

"Why are you just standing there?" Mom asked. "What's wrong? Where's Erica?"

"She—" I took a deep breath, then started again. "She's not, she's, she's not—"

Mom left the kitchen. "Erica," she called. "Erica!"

Dad grabbed my shoulders and spun me around to face him. "What's going on, Daniel? Where's your sister?"

"She's not here, Dad. I don't know where she is. We had a fight. She wouldn't come home with me—she, she ran off—"

"She *ran off*?" Dad stared at me. "Why didn't you go after her? How could you let her run off?"

"I tried to stop her, Dad, but she was mad just like yesterday, and I—"

His eyes lit on the jar of peanut butter and the loaf of bread I'd forgotten to put away. "You came home and ate a sandwich? Is that what you did?"

"I thought she'd be here any minute. I never imagined she'd do something like this."

Mom reappeared. "She's not in the house, Ted."

Dad grabbed my shoulders again, harder this time. "Where did you last see her?"

"In the clearing. We were looking for the doll, but she wasn't there, and Erica wouldn't come home with me. She got mad. She said it was all my fault, and then she ran away from me, and I got mad at her and came home."

Dad swore softly. "Martha, you stay here in case she comes back. Daniel, grab your jacket and a couple of flashlights."

I followed Dad out into the cold, dark night. The wind was blowing harder now, and the trees sent wild rocking shadows across the driveway. In the woods, Dad began calling Erica. I joined in.

Erica, Erica, Erica. Her name bounced from tree to tree, caught by the wind, tossed into the sky. But she didn't answer. She didn't come.

"Where are you?" Dad called, his voice scraped raw from shouting.

Are you, are you, are you, the trees repeated. Creatures in the underbrush rustled. An owl screeched.

Our voices sounded small in the noisy darkness.

We called her name again and again. We waved our flashlights in hope that she'd see their bobbing light. We were hoarse from calling. And

desperate when she didn't answer.

The faint trail gave out, and we began circling back to the house without realizing it until we saw the lights in the windows.

"We need to call the police," Dad said. "We don't know the land the way they do. We'll get lost ourselves if we keep going."

Wordlessly, we made our way home. Mom was on the front porch, shivering in her warmest down coat. "You didn't find her?"

"No." Dad stopped to hug her. Mom clung to him. They stood there whispering to each other, as if they'd forgotten about me. I waited, shifting my weight from one frozen foot to the other, afraid Bloody Bones might be watching us from the trees.

Not that I believed he actually existed, not in my world, the real world, the five-senses world. But with the wind blowing and the moon sailing in and out of clouds like a ghost racing across the sky, I could almost believe I'd crossed a border into another world, where anything could be true—even conjure women and spells and monsters.

The police came sooner than we'd expected. We heard their sirens and saw their flashing lights before they'd even turned into the driveway. Four cars and an ambulance stopped at the side of the house. Doors opened, men got out. A couple of them had dogs, big German shepherds who pulled on their leashes, excited. Flashing lights washed the living room walls with red and blue.

"Why did they bring an ambulance?" Mom clung to Dad, her face a strange ashen color.

He frowned at the scene outside. "It's standard procedure when something like this happens."

Something like what? I wondered. No one was hurt. We didn't need an ambulance. Unless they thought—but no, Erica wasn't hurt, she was just lost. They'd find her fast with those dogs. I'd tell her I was sorry I got mad at her. I was scared, that was all. Scared of what? An old folktale? I shivered as a draft of cold air came creeping into the house. At my age, how could I be scared of a bogeyman?

Two policemen came inside and went upstairs. I heard their shoes clunking overhead. A policewoman sat down with us at the dining room table. She had questions: Erica's full name and age, a description of her and the clothes she was wearing, and the circumstances of her disappearance.

“Daniel was supposed to walk home from the school-bus stop with Erica,” Mom said in a shaky voice, “but they had a fight, and, and—” She faltered and tried to brush away her tears.

The detective turned to me. “What was the fight about?” She’d been jotting things in a little notebook, and now she sat looking at me, waiting, her pen poised. She had stubby fingers and close-cut fingernails, no polish. No makeup either. A plain face, short hair. Not very friendly. Small, hard eyes. The name on her badge said Detective Irma Shank.

I told her what I’d told Dad, still leaving out any mention of things in the woods or Selene Estes. My hands shook, and one leg jiggled without my being able to stop it.

“So he came home and ate a peanut butter sandwich,” Mom said when I’d finished. “Then I imagine he went upstairs to play a game on his iPad. When we came home, he panicked and told us what happened.”

While Mom talked, Detective Shank watched me, still jotting things down. “Is that what you did, Daniel?”

“Yes, but I thought Erica was playing a trick on me. She does things like that.”

She looked at Dad and Mom, and they nodded. “Sometimes Erica is very willful,” Dad said. “She’s not happy here.”

I wanted to say, *That goes for all of us,* but I kept my mouth shut.

“Where did you live before you moved here?”

“Fairfield, Connecticut,” Dad said.

Detective Shank leaned across the table. “I know your daughter’s only seven, but do you think she’d try to go back there?”

Dad and Mom looked at each other and shook their heads. None of us could picture Erica going to Connecticut. She had no money, and even if she did, what ticket seller would let her get on a bus all by herself?

“She’s high-strung, fearful,” Mom said. “I can’t imagine her being outside in the dark—she’s afraid of the dark. She sleeps with a light on.” Now Mom began to cry in earnest. “She must be so scared. And so cold.”

A policeman came inside. “We need something Erica has worn recently so we can set the dogs on her trail.”

“And a recent photograph,” Detective Shank added.

Dad went upstairs and came back with a pair of red socks Erica had worn the day before. Mom gave the police one of a recent set of school photographs.

“Beautiful little girl,” Detective Shank said. “But such a sad expression.” She looked at us with narrowed eyes, as if she were blaming us for everything.

The policeman went outside with the socks. Through the window, I saw the dogs sniff the socks before the police led them into the field.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” Mom said. “It’s like a nightmare.”

“I know. I know.” The detective patted Mom’s hand. “Would you like tea?”

Mom nodded, and the woman went to the kitchen.

“Make yourself useful, Daniel,” Dad said. “Show her where things are.”

“Please don’t blame me for this, Dad.”

Dad looked around the room. “I don’t see anyone else to blame.”

In the kitchen, I went to the cabinet over the stove and got out cups and saucers. Detective Shank had already found tea bags and put the kettle on the stove.

While we waited for the water to boil, she looked at me. “When you and Erica were fighting, did you hit Erica, Daniel? Knock her down or hurt her somehow?”

Her question really upset me. Did she suspect me of harming Erica in some way or leaving her unconscious in the woods?

“I shoved her,” I admitted, “and she fell down, but not hard. She jumped up and ran away from me.”

“Are you sure that’s all you did?”

“I’d never hurt my sister.”

“Of course you wouldn’t. Not on purpose.” She looked at my face closely and touched the scratches on my cheek. “Did Erica do this?”

“It was a branch. She pushed it out of her way, and it swung back and hit me. The thorns scratched me, not my sister.”

“What were you fighting about?”

“I told you. She was mad about the doll. She said it was my fault it was gone.”

“Why did you prevent Erica from picking up the doll yesterday?”

“It was almost dark. We had to go home.”

“I don’t understand what difference it would have made to pick up the doll.”

I started crying. I couldn’t help it. “I should have let her get the doll. She really loves it. I wish I had, but I, I—I don’t like being in the woods when

it's dark."

The teakettle started whistling while I was trying to explain. Mom heard it, I guess, and came to the door. "What's going on?" she asked the detective. "Daniel's a minor. You have no right to question him without my permission."

"I'm just trying to understand why the doll was left in the woods yesterday, ma'am. It seems peculiar."

Mom turned off the stove, and the kettle's shrill whistle stopped. She put an arm around me, and I leaned against her, incredibly grateful for her protection. I'd begun to think that my whole family, as well as everyone else in Woodville, hated me, including Detective Irma Shank.

"I was scared," I finally admitted. "I was scared to stop for the doll."

"What were you afraid of?" Detective Shank shook her head, as if she didn't believe me. "You don't look like the sort of boy who's easily scared."

"I thought I saw something in the woods, in the shadows," I told her. "I was scared it was coming after Erica and me."

Detective Shank seemed unconvinced. Probably she'd already decided I had more to do with Erica's disappearance than I was saying.

Mom spoke up. "The children have been nervous, anxious. They're not used to living in the country with no neighbors. It's so dark at night. They're imaginative. They, they—"

Mom held me tighter. She was crying again. "Daniel has told you all he knows. Please spend your time searching for Erica. She's out there in the cold, and you're sitting here questioning Daniel as if you suspect him of harming his sister."

Detective Shank got to her feet. "Children often know more than they let on," she said with a glance at me. "I'm trying to understand all the aspects, ma'am. Believe me, I want to find your daughter as much as you do."

With that, the detective left the house and joined the police, who were now searching the shed.

"Do you still want tea, Mom?"

She nodded, and I made us both a cup. "Do you think Dad wants one?"

"He's outside, no doubt making a nuisance of himself." Cup in hand, she went to the window and stared past the reflection of the kitchen into the darkness beyond. "Where can she be, Daniel?"

Suddenly Dad barged into the kitchen with a couple of cops. He was holding Erica's knit hat, the one she'd worn yesterday. "One of the dogs

found it caught on a branch," he said, "about a mile from here. A mile! How could she have gone that far?"

Mom took the hat and pressed it to her face. Crying softly, she continued to gaze into the darkness beyond the window.

"Where are the dogs?" I asked. "Are they still on Erica's trail?"

Dad gestured toward the squad cars and the ambulance still parked near the house. "Out there. They lost her scent not long after they found the hat."

I stared at Dad. "But they'll find her, right?"

"Yes, of course. Tomorrow they'll ask for volunteers to form lines and search the woods. It'll be better in the daylight. They can . . ." His voice dropped, and he stared out the window. "I can't believe this."

Before the police left, the officer in charge told us to get some sleep, to hope for the best. Erica was probably lost, but with the help of volunteer searchers, they'd find her tomorrow.

I can't speak for my parents, but I doubt they slept much that night. I certainly didn't. For hours, I sat at my bedroom window, willing Erica to find her way out of the woods.

I'll never tease you again or get mad at you, I promised. *Just come home. Please, Erica, please come home. I'm so, so sorry.*

TEN

In the gray light of dawn I woke to the sound of voices in the kitchen. Mom was serving coffee to the volunteers who had brought doughnuts and Danish pastries and sticky buns. The whole house smelled like sugar, but I had no appetite for any of it.

Mom gave me a cup of hot chocolate. "Drink it," she said. "It's cold outside. Take some doughnuts or something."

She was pale, her eyes red and puffy from crying, and she was smoking. A woman from the Realtor's office told her to go back to bed, she looked terrible, but Mom insisted she was fine. "We're going to find Erica today," she said.

To please Mom, I took a doughnut and went outside. The police were talking to a bunch of people I didn't know, telling them what was expected of them. Form lines, walk an arm's length apart, examine every inch of ground. "If you see anything that may be connected with Erica, stop and call a policeman. Do not move it, do not touch it, leave it *in situ*, and wait for a policeman."

I edged away toward the woods. No one noticed me go. I had a crazy idea I could find Erica myself, be a hero, make up for leaving the doll and all that it had led to.

In the clearing where I'd last seen my sister, a crow perched in the dead tree. He cocked his head at me, cawed, and flew away. I sat down on the log and tried to think about where Erica might have gone.

I sat there for a while, but no ideas came to me. I stood up and called her, again and again, until my voice was as hoarse and raspy as a crow's. Her name rang in the air, bounced from tree to tree, echoed back to me. But she didn't answer. Nor did she come running out of the woods, her red curls in a tangle, her parka muddy—breathless, cold, hungry, elated to see me, Daniel, her rescuer.

"You won't find her that way."

I spun around, startled to see Brody standing a few feet away. He wore a ratty fringed suede jacket that looked as if it had once belonged to his

mother. His bony knees stuck out of holes in his jeans, and his hair straggled over his eyes.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him.

"My dad's in the search party, so I thought I'd come along over and see what's going on. I heard you calling your sister's name. I doubt she'll hear you, no matter how loud you yell."

"She might hear me. Nobody knows how far away she is. She could be trying to find her way home right now. She could have fallen into a hole or something."

He edged closer to me, shuffling through leaves as he came. "Listen," he said in a low voice, "there's stuff about this place you don't know, stuff nobody's told you, mainly because you're such a stuck-up snot."

I stared at him suspiciously. His nose was running, and his eyes had a moist, pink look. If I was such a stuck-up snot, what did he want with me? Why was he here?

"What kind of stuff?" I found myself lowering my voice too.

He shrugged and took a quick look around. His eyes lingered on the dead tree. "You know what happened to Selene Estes, right?"

"You told me about her. Remember? On the bus—the first day I came to school."

Brody was almost whispering now. He kept looking at the dead tree. "Well, folks are saying your sister's been took, just like Selene was. And you won't ever see her again."

Took—there was that word again—how had Erica picked it up?

"Don't be so stupid, Brody. Selene disappeared more than fifty years ago. Whoever took her is dead by now—and so is Selene."

"Maybe," Brody said, "maybe not."

"Next you'll be telling me Bloody Bones took her."

"Nah, Old Auntie's got her. Ask anybody in Woodville. They'll tell you."

"Old Auntie lived a long time ago," I said. "She's definitely dead. If she even existed—which I doubt."

Brody shook his head. "She lives way back in the woods, up on Brewster's Hill. Every now and then somebody sees her at night, walking along the highway, collecting dead things. Her and Bloody Bones. That's what they eat. Roadkill."

"I don't believe you."

“You want me to take you to her cabin?” Brody asked, his eyes still boring into mine. “That’s where everybody thinks she kept Selene. Maybe that’s where your sister’s at.”

“I know where it is. I’ve been there with Dad and Erica. It’s an old, falling-down ruin—nobody lives in it.”

“In the daytime, yeah, but at night it looks like it used to.”

“That’s crazy,” I said.

“I’m going up there,” he said. “You can come if you like. Or not. Makes no matter to me what you do.” He turned and started walking away.

I followed him. The fringe on his jacket blew in the wind. The little beads sewed to it rattled and bumped together.

“What do you mean at night it’s like it used to be?” I asked him.

“I mean,” he said slowly, without bothering to look at me, “that it looks like it did when Old Auntie was alive.”

“You just told me she’s alive. Now you’re saying she’s dead?”

“No. What I’m saying is Old Auntie’s a haunt come back from her grave.”

I grabbed Brody’s arm and made him stop and look at me. “Do you expect me to believe that?”

He shrugged. “Believe what you like.” He turned his back again, but I wasn’t through with him.

“This is what I think,” I said. “You’re dragging me up here to play some kind of trick on me. Which is really awful because my sister is missing and the whole town is looking for her and you’re taking advantage of that to get me to go with you. I bet your friends are already up there, getting ready to scare me or something. What kind of kid are you?”

Brody backed away from me. “I’m not up to anything. I want to help you find your sister, that’s all.”

We’d reached the steep part of the trail. The trees had thinned out, and the wind was blowing hard enough to knock me over the edge of the hill.

“Ghosts, monsters, places that are ruins in the daytime, but not after dark,” I said. “It’s all stupid lies, fairy tales. I’m going back to the house. Maybe they’ve found my sister.”

“We’re almost there,” Brody said. “At least take a look.”

I hesitated, stuck between climbing downhill and climbing uphill. I’d come this far, why not go a little farther? What if Erica really was there?

ELEVEN

From the trail, Brody and I climbed down into the hollow. Now that the leaves were gone, the cabin was more visible, but it looked as bad as it had the last time I'd seen it, maybe a little worse.

"Somebody's been here." Brody pointed at Dad's finds—broken stuff, old bottles, animal skulls, still lined up on the stone wall.

"My dad's a photographer. He was taking pictures of those things."

Brody stared at me as if I were even weirder than he'd thought. "You kidding me? Why would anybody take pictures of junk? You got all them beautiful mountains and you waste film on busted plates and broken bottles?"

"Dad's got a digital camera, so he's not wasting film," I said, "and besides, anybody can point a camera at a mountain. My dad's pictures are original. They tell stories."

"Well, let me tell you something. Nobody with any sense messes with Old Auntie's stuff. In fact, hardly anyone ever comes near this place."

"You're here."

"I ain't touched nothing of hers, and I ain't going inside. I'm just trying to help you, that's all."

Brody looked at the cabin's dark doorway. "You went in there, didn't you? That's why the door's open."

A cold wind riffled through the fallen leaves, sending them scurrying through the open door. I shivered, remembering the cabin's dark, damp, creepy atmosphere.

"I didn't stay inside long," I told Brody, "and Erica didn't go in at all. But Dad, well, he poked around, taking pictures, hauling stuff outside, and taking more pictures." I remembered how Erica and I had sat on the wall, barely speaking to each other. Her absence stabbed me with guilt.

Brody kicked at piles of dead leaves and watched then fly up into the air when the wind blew. "Harm's done, I reckon."

"What do you mean? What does all this have to do with my sister?"

He continued to kick at the leaves. "I ain't sure," he said, "but folks say Old Auntie takes a girl and keeps her fifty year—then lets her go and takes

another one. It's been going on since folks first came to this place."

I wanted to hit him in his lying mouth. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"All I know is, fifty years before Selene disappeared, a girl was took, and one was took fifty years before that."

I sat down on the wall where Erica and I had sat. Brody was an ignorant, superstitious idiot, and I didn't believe a word he said, but I wanted to find my sister, I wanted her to come home, and I wanted us all to go back to Connecticut, to the life we had before we came to this horrible place.

Brody shuffled through the leaves and sat beside me. "Here's what you should do," he said. "Come back here at night. Sneak up real quiet, and don't get too close. The cabin will be like it was two hundred years ago. Old Auntie will be in there, and your sister will be with her."

"How can I believe anything that crazy?"

"'Cause it's the truth." Brody was so close to me I could see his little gray teeth and the dirt rings in his neck. His pale eyes peered out from his tangled hair. "I swear."

The wind died down, as if it were waiting to blow my words across time and into Old Auntie's ears.

"Will you come with me?"

He shook his head and got to his feet. "Let's get out of here."

"Shouldn't we look inside before we go?"

He edged away from the ruins. "Not me," he said. "You go in there, she might take you, too."

"You're afraid," I said.

"So what if I am?" Brody's nose was running. He wiped it on his sleeve, leaving a slimy trail on the suede. "At least I ain't stupid."

"Won't you at least wait outside?"

"Nope." Brody turned away. "I told you what you need to know."

I watched him climb out of the hollow. For a while I heard him on the trail, and then it was just me and the wind and a pair of buzzards circling overhead.

I went to the door of the cabin. "Erica," I called softly. "Erica, are you in there?"

The ruins were silent. The only things moving were the dead vines blowing in the wind and three or four crows cawing to one another from the trees.

I should go home, I thought. *But why?* Everyone except Mom was out searching for my sister.

"Erica," I whispered. "Where are you?"

I heard a muffled noise, as if someone were moving around inside the cabin. What if Erica was trapped there? Not by Old Auntie but by a fallen rafter or something. I walked slowly through the cabin door. *Please please please, let it be my sister, let her be all right.*

It took my eyes a few moments to adjust to the dark. "Erica? Are you in here?"

More noise, frantic sounds, as if someone were trying to hide or run away. "Who's here?" I hoped my voice didn't give away my fear.

Scrabbling sounds. An animal, I thought, a fox or a raccoon.

I started backing toward the door when I saw a flash of green in a shadowy corner, red hair, a blue scarf.

"Erica!" I climbed over a rafter, ducked under a tree that had fallen through the roof, and stumbled across the uneven floor. "Erica, wait! Don't run. It's me, Daniel!"

But she was climbing up a pile of rubble and trying to squeeze through the splintered remains of a window. Frantically, I grabbed her foot and tugged.

"What's wrong with you?" I shouted. "I've come to take you home!"

Suddenly she fell back toward me, and I saw her face. She was not my sister. Sickly and pale, her skin grimy with dirt, she had the look of a wild creature.

I gripped her skinny wrists tightly. "Who are you? How did you get my sister's clothes? Where is she?"

"Let me go, let me go." The girl twisted and turned. She was so thin I was afraid of breaking her bones, but I couldn't let her go, not until she told me where she'd gotten Erica's things.

"That's my sister's jacket, her scarf, her jeans and sweater, her shoes." I shook her. "Where did you get them?"

"She give 'em to me. Told me they was my clothes, I could keep them."

"Erica gave you her clothes?"

"I don't know nothing about Erica."

"Who gave the clothes to you, then?" I was frantic now. And scared.

"Auntie, she told me to wear 'em home. But I'm scairt to leave the cabin. I don't remember none other home."

She looked around. “Thing is, I don’t know what’s happened to it. There must have been a fearsome storm to make it look like this.”

The girl was beginning to scare me. “What’s your name?”

“Let me go.” She began to struggle again, but she was weaker now and easier to hold on to.

“Look,” I said. “You don’t need to be scared. I’m not going to hurt you. Just tell me your name.”

“Auntie calls me Girl.”

“Girl isn’t a name. It’s what you are.”

“Ain’t that what a name is? What you are?”

“No, a name is *who* you are.”

“I can’t see no difference. Besides, Girl is all the name I got.”

She couldn’t be who I thought she was. No matter what that liar Brody said, it was impossible—Selene would be almost sixty years old now. Still, I asked anyway. “Does the name Selene Estes mean anything to you?”

“No, no it don’t.” She struggled to get away. Her wrist bones moved under her skin. “Let me go, please. I didn’t do nothing, only what Auntie told me.”

Holding her tightly, I pulled her toward the door. “You’re coming with me.”

“No. No!” She fought me with all her strength, but she was puny and probably underfed.

With one free hand, she grabbed the doorpost and held on. “Let me get the pretty dolly. Auntie give her to me. She said I was to take good care of her.”

Keeping her close, I let her go back to the corner where she’d been hiding. There, in a pile of rags, was Little Erica.

Seeing the doll gave me shivers all over. “That’s my sister’s doll,” I said. “She left her in the woods, and someone stole her. Either you or Auntie—”

“I never stole nothing. Auntie found her.” The girl picked up the doll by one arm and cuddled her close. “She’s the prettiest thing I ever seen. I love her to death.”

Little Erica stared at the girl with her blank blue eyes. The small smile still curved the corners of her mouth, but her clothing was soiled, her hair tangled, and her face dirty.

“It’s a special doll made to look like my sister,” I told the girl.

“Your sister must be real pretty,” the girl said.

“Are you sure you haven’t seen her? She’s been missing since yesterday. Please, you must know something. You have her clothes, her doll.”

“I never see anyone but Auntie.” The girl looked around, as if she hoped to find Auntie hiding in the shadows. She was as desperate as I was.

“Where is Auntie now?” I asked.

“Gone. She don’t want me no more because I can’t do the work she needs done. She says she’s got someone new to help her.”

The girl’s eyes filled with tears. I watched them run down her dirty face, leaving little trails in the grime. She was the most pitiful creature I’d ever seen. “Come home with me.” I tugged her wrist hard. “You can’t stay here all by yourself.”

I expected her to fight me, but she followed me outside as if she’d lost all her strength. One hand held Little Erica, the other held mine. Maybe she was as tired of struggling as I was.

She looked back at the cabin so often, she stumbled on roots and stones and almost fell. When she could no longer see the ruin, not even the chimney, she whimpered like a frightened puppy.

“Are you afraid?” I asked her.

“Yes,” she whispered. “I’m scairt of leaving the cabin.”

“How long have you lived with Auntie?”

“A long, long, long time.”

“Were you a baby when you came here?”

“No. I always been just like I am now.”

“Then you can’t have been with her very long. You’d be older.”

The girl looked far off into the trees and the mountains beyond them and up at the sky. “It seems like a long time.”

“You know the story about Selene, don’t you?”

She shook her head. “I told you and told you, I don’t know nothing about Selene.”

“Everybody who lives here knows the story!” I yelled at her. “You’re just play-acting, aren’t you? Did Brody put you up to this?”

“Stop yelling at me. I don’t know Brody, and I ain’t play-acting.”

I studied her pale face, the dark circles under her eyes, the tangled wildness of her red hair. She seemed older than she was—exhausted, malnourished, neglected.

What if Brody was right and this strange girl was Selene? And Old Auntie had swapped her for Erica?

No, I told myself, *no.* Old Auntie was a legend, a folktale, not a real live person. She wasn't out here in the woods, roaming the hills and valleys with Bloody Bones, snatching girls to be her helpers every fifty years. How could anyone believe such nonsense?

Not my parents and not me, either. I held the girl's wrist tighter and made her walk faster. Sooner or later, someone would get the truth out of her.

In Auntie's Cabin

The old woman watches the boy lead Selene away. She chuckles to herself. She can see Selene, but Selene can't see her no more. The boy will take her down the hill to the farm. They'll keep her there until she dies, which won't be long, a few days, a week maybe. It's what happens when they go back to their time. Makes no difference to Auntie. She's got herself a new girl now.

Trouble is, the girl ain't quite up to the work. You'd think she'd never tended a fire or swept a floor or cooked a meal or scrubbed a pot. She acts like she never seen a washtub. She don't know how to make soap or candles or sew a seam. Out in the garden she pulls up more vegetables than weeds. She can't tell an onion from a beet. She's scairt of spiders and anything else that crawls on floors or scurries across walls or hides in the firewood.

What can Auntie do with such a stupid, lazy girl but scold her and beat her and shut her up in the hidey-hole under the cabin floor.

When she can't stand it no longer, Auntie brings in Bloody Bones and tells the girl he eats bad children like her. The girl cries and shakes with fear at the sight of Auntie's dear boy. He rears up over her, taller than most men. Why, his head bumps the ceiling.

He clacks his teeth and rattles his bones. He makes the girl look into the dark eyeholes in his skull, which is like looking into a bottomless hole, blacker than the blackest night. The girl curls up into a ball like a baby that don't want to be birthed.

After Auntie sends her dear boy outside, the girl tells the old woman she's doing her best, but that ain't good enough, is it? She cries and promises to do better. But she keeps on dropping things and spilling things and breaking things like that's all she's good for.

What Auntie needs is a servant who does everything she's told and never gets tired or needs to be fed. She'd give just about anything to have herself one of them.

She reminds herself she's had the girl for only a few days. Maybe she'll catch on if Auntie beats her harder and locks her up in the hidey-hole more often and threatens to give her to Bloody Bones for his supper.

In the meantime, she better not catch that boy snooping around the cabin again. Or that pitiful Selene either.

TWELVE

When we came in sight of the house, the girl stopped for a moment and stared at it.

"Does it look familiar?" I asked. "Have you ever seen it?"

She shook her head. "I never seen a house that big before. Rich people must live there."

"It's where I live," I told her. "But we're not rich."

She pointed at the junk in the field, which was easier to see now that cold weather had stripped the leaves away. "Look at all the stuff your people threw away. Only rich people would throw out so many good things."

As we drew near the house, the back door flew open and Mom ran toward us. "Erica," she cried. "Thank God you're home! Where have you __"

She stopped a foot away and dropped her outstretched arms. "Who are you?" she said. "Where did you get my daughter's clothes? And her doll?"

Lunging at the girl, Mom grabbed Little Erica out of her arms and clasped the doll to her chest. She looked as if she was about to collapse from disappointment.

The girl reached for Little Erica. "She's mine. Auntie give her to me."

Ignoring the girl, Mom turned to me. "What's the meaning of this? Why have you brought her here? How did she get your sister's things?" Her voice rose with every question, as if she thought I'd played a cruel trick on her.

"She was hiding in the old cabin where Dad took pictures last month," I told Mom. "She says her aunt gave her the clothes and the doll and told her to leave, she was finished with her."

"Oh, no, no, no." Still hugging the doll, Mom sank down on the porch steps. "Erica," she cried. "Erica." She put her head on her knees and sobbed.

"Please." I held the girl's cold little hands. "If you know anything, please tell me."

She darted an ugly look at my mother. "She's got to give my dolly back. Auntie give her to me. She's mine."

Just then the kitchen door opened and a woman stuck her head out. A stranger. “Oh, thank goodness,” she said. “You found her.”

Mom ran past the woman and disappeared inside, holding the doll and crying. I heard her pound up the back stairs to her room.

The woman stood in the doorway, puzzled. “That’s not Erica?” she asked.

I shook my head. “I found her hiding in the old cabin up the trail. She’s wearing Erica’s clothes, but—”

The woman came down the steps and looked closely at the girl. “What’s your name, honey? Where do you live?”

“I’m Girl. I live up yonder with Auntie.” She pointed toward the trail that led to the cabin. “Only she don’t need me no more. She said so herself. She give me these clothes and told me to go home, but the onliest home I got is with Auntie.” She began to cry again, washing more streaks of dirt down her face.

The woman knelt in front of the girl and cupped her face in her hands. “It can’t be,” she whispered. “God’s love, it can’t be.”

“What can’t be, ma’am?” Girl peered at the woman, her face creased in worry.

“Never you mind. It’s just my mind wandering.” The woman got to her feet and said to me, “You must be Daniel. I’m Mrs. O’Neill. I believe you’ve already met my husband.”

Taking the girl’s hand, Mrs. O’Neill said, “Let’s take this poor child inside and give her something nice to eat. Hot soup, maybe? She looks cold and hungry.”

Mrs. O’Neill led the girl into the kitchen and settled her at the table. While she opened a can of chicken soup with rice and poured it into a pot, the girl looked around.

“My goodness,” she said. “You told me you ain’t rich, but look at the things you got. Nothing’s broken or busted either. It’s all clean and new and shiny.”

“Well—” How could I tell her that Mom complained about the old-fashioned gas stove she had to light with a match and the refrigerator she had to defrost and the ugly white metal cabinets she hated and the dripping faucets and the black and white squares of cracked linoleum covering the floor?

Mrs. O'Neill made toast and poured two bowls of soup—one for the girl and one for me. Then she sat down with us and studied the girl. The girl's manners were terrible. She slurped and slopped the soup, holding the bowl with one hand, as if she thought I might take it from her. She stuffed the toast into her mouth and almost choked. It was like eating at the table with your dog or something.

When the girl was finished, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and blew her nose on the napkin.

Mrs. O'Neill stroked her tangled hair. "How would you like a nice hot bath?"

The girl frowned. "I don't much care for baths."

"Let's go upstairs. When you see the tub, you might change your mind." Mrs. O'Neill led the amazingly docile girl up the back stairs. I waited to hear yelling and screaming and thuds and thumps and doors slamming, but instead, the water ran into the tub and all was quiet.

I fixed a cup of hot chocolate and stood at the kitchen window. The wind was blowing harder now and the short day was running out of light. The second night without Erica was almost here.

After a while Mrs. O'Neill came downstairs carrying the girl. She'd changed her from a scary little wild creature into an almost normal kid. Her hair had been washed and combed, her face and hands were clean, and she was wearing one of Dad's old plaid flannel shirts, last seen hanging on a hook in the bathroom. It fit her like a long nightgown.

"She needs to rest," Mrs. O'Neill said. "I don't want to put her in your sister's room. Can she sleep in your bed for a while?"

I hesitated, but where else was the girl to sleep? At least she was clean now. Reluctantly, I led the way to my room.

By the time Mrs. O'Neill laid her down, the girl was asleep. Covering her with a quilt, she looked at her in the dim light. "You poor child," she whispered. "Where have you been all this time? What's happened to you?"

"Do you think she's Selene?"

"Let her sleep. We'll talk downstairs." Mrs. O'Neill led me into the hall and closed my bedroom door. Glancing at Mom's closed door, she said, "Don't wake your mother. She's exhausted."

I followed her down the back stairs to the kitchen. Now that it was dark, the wind blew harder. It tugged at the corners of the house and wailed, as if it wanted to come inside. The sound made me cold all over.

“Help me lay out the food,” Mrs. O’Neill said. “The men will be back soon, cold and hungry.”

Women from town had sent casseroles, sandwich platters, cakes, and pies. It surprised me that they’d cared enough about us, the outsiders, to help. Except for the O’Neills, no one had made any effort to welcome us until now.

While we set out dishes, Mrs. O’Neill said, “We knew Selene Estes, John and I.”

“He told me that Selene was best friends with your daughter.” I looked at her. “But she’d be almost sixty years old now. And that girl upstairs appears to be my sister’s age. How can she be Selene?”

Mrs. O’Neill shook her head. “When I first saw her, I was struck by her resemblance to Selene. It wasn’t until I bathed her that I began to think she really is Selene—not only the same hair and the same eyes, but even the same birthmark on her shoulder.”

“Maybe she’s faking it,” I suggested. “Play-acting a story everybody knows.”

“That doesn’t explain the birthmark.” Mrs. O’Neill paused to set out ladles for the macaroni and the baked beans.

“The trouble is,” she went on, “I can’t think of any other explanation for your sister’s disappearance and this child’s appearance.”

Maybe I was as crazy as everyone else in this valley, but the more Mrs. O’Neill talked, the more I began to think the girl upstairs might actually be Selene Estes. In this valley, anything could be true, even a conjure woman walking the hills with her pet hog and stealing a girl every fifty years.

“It’s happened before, you know,” Mrs. O’Neill said. “When Selene disappeared, the search party found a little girl in the woods. Nobody knew who she was, and she couldn’t tell them.”

“What happened to her?”

Mrs. O’Neill sighed. “They put her in an orphanage. She wouldn’t eat or drink. In less than a month, she died without ever saying who she was or where she came from. But somebody remembered that a child had disappeared fifty years previously. So it seemed the old stories were true after all.”

I was about to ask more questions, but the sharp sound of barking dogs scattered my thoughts. I ran to the window. The day had ended and

flashlight beams sliced the darkness, illuminating a tree here, a man there. The search party was coming back.

The back door banged open, and Dad led a group of men into the kitchen, big men in work clothes, stomping their feet, red-faced from the cold, talking in low voices.

"Where's your mother?" Dad asked me.

Before I could answer, Mom came stumbling down the back stairs, still half asleep, from the look of her. "Have you found Erica?" She gazed around the room wildly, her eyes flitting from one person to the next. "Where is she?"

The searchers drew together, holding sandwiches but too polite to eat them.

Dad drew Mom close. "I'm so sorry, Martha."

Mom beat her fists against his chest. "You didn't look long enough. You must have missed something, you, you—" She collapsed against him.

He held her up, kept her from falling, stroked her hair, tried to comfort her.

"Believe me, ma'am," Mr. O'Neill told Mom, "we searched every inch of these woods. We didn't find a trace of her. Neither did the dogs."

Mom turned to me. "Where's that girl you brought home? The one with Erica's doll, the one wearing her clothes? Ask *her* where my daughter is. Make her tell you!"

Everyone in the room seemed to stop breathing. No one moved. No one spoke. The only sound was the *tick-tock-tick* of the kitchen clock and the wind rattling the windowpanes.

"What girl?" Dad asked, looking from Mom to me. "What's she talking about, Daniel?"

Before I could answer, Mrs. O'Neill said, "She's talking about Selene. Daniel found her. She's upstairs sleeping."

The group of searchers huddled together, half-finished plates of food in their hands, and mumbled to one another. I heard Selene's name once or twice, but their voices dropped even lower into whispers. Men shook their heads. They looked worried. Frightened, even. A couple of them made excuses and left the house. I heard a car start, saw its headlights, watched its taillights as it sped away.

"What's wrong?" Dad asked Mr. O'Neill. "Why are they leaving?"

“It’s the girl,” he said slowly, as if answering the question embarrassed him. “They’re saying that Old Auntie’s got your daughter, and there’s no use looking for her.”

While Dad stood there, flabbergasted, the last three men thanked us for the food and drink and edged out the back door. In the yard, engines revved, headlights lit the field, and in a couple of minutes the search party was gone.

Mr. O’Neill turned to his wife. “Maybe you should get the girl, bring her down, let Ted see for himself.”

Mrs. O’Neill started up the back stairs, and I followed her. Stopping at my closed door, she tapped gently. “So as not to startle her,” she whispered.

When no one answered, she opened the door and peeked inside. The window was wide open, and the curtains blew like streamers in the cold air.

Mrs. O’Neill ran to the window and looked out into the night. All that moved were the shadows of trees tossed by the wind.

“She must have gone back to the cabin,” I said. “Someone should go after her.”

Mrs. O’Neill shook her head. “There’s not a man from these parts who’ll go near that cabin at night.”

“Not even the police?”

“Every one of them grew up here. They’ve heard stories all their lives about Old Auntie. Most of them swear they’ve seen her and Bloody Bones in the woods or alongside a dark road.”

I watched Mrs. O’Neill hurry down the back stairs, and then I took a quick look around my room. A sweater and pair of jeans I’d left on a chair were gone, and so were my old running shoes. I tiptoed across the hall and checked Mom’s room. Little Erica was gone too.

I went to the top of the back stairs and listened. Mom was crying, and Dad was calling the state troopers. “Surely they don’t believe in this superstitious nonsense,” I heard him say.

Mr. and Mrs. O’Neill were talking in low voices. It sounded as if they were cleaning up the kitchen.

Taking care to make no noise, I crept down the front stairs, grabbed my parka and hat from the coatrack by the door, and slipped quietly outside. For a second, I hesitated. What if I got lost? I needed someone to come with me, someone who knew the way.

Brody had refused to go near the cabin in broad daylight, but maybe I could talk him into going to the top of the trail with me—it was a long shot, but who else could I ask?

THIRTEEN

By the time I was in sight of Brody's ramshackle old house, I heard a dog bark, then another. In the dim light of the half-moon I saw three or four of them coming down the driveway toward me. What should I do? If I ran, they'd chase me. Maybe if I stood still, they'd just sniff me and leave me alone. They looked like hounds of some kind, not very big, hopefully not very fierce, either.

They stopped about two feet away and kept barking. A light on the front porch came on, and the front door opened.

"Brody!" I yelled. "It's me, Daniel! Call off the dogs."

A gruff male voice called, "You the boy from the Estes farm?"

"Yes, sir." The dogs surrounded me, sniffing and muttering to one another in dog language.

The man whistled, and the dogs ran up the drive toward the house. "Come on," he called to me. "They won't hurt you."

Keeping an eye on the dogs just in case he was wrong, I climbed the porch steps.

"I saw you at the house," he said. "I was in the search party. I'm sorry we didn't find your little sister. We done our best, but—" Shaking his head, he called Brody. "The boy from the Estes farm is here. He wants to see you."

Brody came to the door. "What you want?"

"Can I talk to you about something?" I shot a quick look at his dad, hoping Brody would get the message that this was just between him and me.

"If it's about your sister, I already told you what I think."

"Well, it's actually about Selene."

"Selene?" Mr. Mason leaned closer. I smelled beer and cigarette smoke on his breath. "It's really her, then?"

"The O'Neills think so."

"Where's she now?" Brody asked.

I gave up on trying to keep things between him and me. "I don't know. She ran away."

"Went back to the cabin, I reckon," Mr. Mason said.

“That’s what I think.” I looked at Brody. “Maybe Erica’s there, too. Will you go up there with me?”

Mr. Mason put a hand on my shoulder. “You go on home, boy. Ain’t a soul in this valley will go there with you. Certainly not my boy.”

“She’s my sister,” I said. “I have to get her back.”

Brody shook his head. “How you think you’ll do that? Just knock on the door and say, ‘Please, Miss Auntie, give me my sister’?”

Mr. Mason sighed. “Do like I said, boy. Go home. There’s nothing you nor me nor anyone else can do for your sister.”

“But—”

Mr. Mason stopped me. “Go home. Before you freeze to death.”

I left them standing on the porch, watching me, as if to make sure I went home. I walked off in the right direction, but once I reached the end of their driveway, I headed into the woods.

I hadn’t gone far when I heard a noise behind me, as if something was following me. I glanced over my shoulder and saw nothing. If I ran, whatever it was would chase me. So I kept walking and hoped it was a fox.

“Wait up, Daniel.” Brody ran toward me. He had one of the dogs with him. “You’re going up there, ain’t you?”

“Are you coming with me?”

“Not me, but I brought Bella. Don’t know if she’ll protect you, but if you get lost, she’ll bring you home.” He held out the dog’s leash, and I took it.

“She’s a good old dog.” Brody bent down to scratch behind Bella’s ears. “Part beagle, part fox hound, part something bigger—just a mutt, really, but smart as all get-out. You tell her ‘home’ and she’ll lead you there.”

“Thanks.” I patted Bella, and she wagged her tail. She had a pointed nose, a sharp face, and perked-up ears. Her fur was white with dark patches, and her legs were long. She was sleek and slim, and I could tell by her eyes that she was smart, like Brody said.

“You be careful.” Brody stepped back, and I didn’t know if he was talking to the dog or to me. “I got to get back before Dad misses me or Bella. He says you’re crazy to even think about going near Old Auntie’s cabin, but being you’re a stranger here, he reckons you’re just plain ignorant.”

Brody backed away into the woods. “Good luck.” With that, he was gone into the night as quickly as he’d come.

Bella looked after him and whined, but she seemed to know she was supposed to stay with me. “Come on, girl,” I said, and she darted ahead, as if to lead the way.

I watched her prance along and wished she were mine. It comforted me to think of coming home with Erica and then getting into bed with Bella curled up beside me.

But Bella wasn’t mine, and I wasn’t sure I’d bring Erica home or even come home myself.

I followed the dog up the trail. Every now and then an owl hooted, sometimes close by, sometimes far away. Once in a while Bella stopped and looked into the woods, as if she saw things invisible to me. She growled or whined, glanced back at me, then went on. She never tugged at the leash but kept a steady pace. She’d been on this path before, I thought, probably hunting raccoons or something.

As the trail grew steeper, Bella paused more often, her body tense. She walked slower, dropping back until she was almost by my side. The wind blew harder up there, and the moon slid in and out from the clouds, sometimes lighting the path, sometimes casting it into darkness. I shivered; my teeth chattered—not just because I was cold, which I was, but also because we’d reached the drop-off.

Bella pressed against my side, and I felt her body tremble. “Careful, girl,” I whispered. “We’re right on the edge of the trail.”

From where I stood, I looked down, way down into the valley, which was awash with moonlight. One misstep, and you’d be over the side of the hill, falling, falling, falling to certain death on the rocks below.

Staying as far away from the edge as possible, I forced myself to keep climbing. Finally we reached the top. The hollow lay in shadows, darker than anywhere else, as black as an underground cavern.

Suddenly Bella stiffened and moved forward, ears erect, body tense, growling softly. Something moved in the hollow below us.

Bella’s growl turned to a whine, and she pressed against me as if she were frightened.

For a second, I hoped I’d found Erica, but instead Selene stepped out of the cabin’s shadow, more woebegone than ever.

Bella whined and looked up at me. “It’s okay,” I whispered to the dog.

Selene stayed where she was. “Will that dog bite me?”

I shook my head. “She’s a good dog. Her name’s Bella.”

As Selene came closer, Bella made no effort to greet her. If anything, she pressed closer to me. She was still trembling.

Selene looked at the dog. “She don’t like me,” she said sadly.

I wasn’t interested in how Bella felt about Selene. All I wanted was to find my sister. “You said the cabin would look like it did when you lived here.”

“It does,” Selene said. “Can’t you see the light in the window?”

I peered into the blackness. “There’s nothing there,” I said.

She pointed. “Right there. And smoke’s coming from the chimney. Your sister’s in there. I seen her through the window, but I can’t get in.”

I stared into the darkness until my eyeballs ached, but I couldn’t see anything. “Are you telling the truth or play-acting?”

“I’m telling you the honest-to-God truth. She’s setting by the fire, stirring the pot like I used to. Only she’s not doing it right, and Auntie will give her a walloping when she comes home.”

“She’ll beat my sister?”

“That’s what she does if you don’t do things right—she wallops you. I used to get bruises all over me till I learned.”

Nobody was going to hurt my sister. If she was in that cabin, I’d break the door down and rescue her. With Bella and Selene behind me, I plunged downhill into the hollow, scrambling and slipping on loose stones. But all I saw were the same ruins I’d always seen.

Bella hung back, as if she knew something was in the ruins, but Selene ran to one of the few standing walls and looked through a broken window.

“There she be, your sister, just like I said. I don’t see my auntie, though. She must be out in the woods.”

I watched Selene struggle to open the sagging door. “Let me in, girl!” She pounded on the wood with her fists. “Let me in!”

I pulled her away. “There’s nothing here. You’re imagining it.”

Bella whined and danced around me, but I was too busy with Selene to pay any attention to the dog. Finally the dog grabbed my parka. Frantic with fear, she tugged and growled through her clenched teeth and did her best to drag me away from the cabin’s ruins.

In the struggle, I lost my grip on Selene, and she ran into the woods, calling for Auntie.

Even with the girl gone, Bella wouldn’t let go of my parka. She continued to whine and growl and pull me toward the trail.

Freeing myself from Bella, I chased Selene. The dog darted in front of me and blocked my way. I dodged and shouted Selene's name until I was hoarse. She was gone. I'd lost her, just as I'd lost Erica.

At least that's what I thought, until Bella cowered beside me. The woods were very still. The wind stopped. The moon hid behind the clouds.

Coming toward us was Selene. An old woman walked beside her. She leaned on a staff and carried a bundle. Her long skirt was the color of the winter sky on a starless night, her shawl as black as midnight. Long strands of white hair blew about her head. Shadows hid her face.

I wanted to run, but I couldn't move. Neither could Bella. We were frozen, paralyzed, under a spell. We could do nothing but watch the two of them approach. Old Auntie shoved Selene toward me. "I brung her back. She ain't mine no more. Take her home and keep her there, boy. She's your sister now. The girl in the cabin is my girl. Look for her in fifty years if you want her back."

"No, Auntie," Selene cried. "Ain't I worked hard all my life for you? Give her back and let me stay with you. I'll work hard, I'll do better, I promise you."

Selene tried to embrace Old Auntie, but the old woman pushed her away. The girl sprawled on the ground at my feet. Bella sniffed her and whimpered.

"Now, you go on and get out of here," Old Auntie told her. "Don't let me see you no more. Don't come looking for me. Stay away from my cabin. You hear me?"

Selene lay on the ground, a pathetic little creature. Her body shook with sobs.

"If you come begging at my door again, I'll send my boy after you." Old Auntie spit on the ground. "You know what he can do, Girl. He'll make you sorry. And that's the truth."

Selene shuddered and peered into the darkness. "Is he close by?" she whispered.

"Bloody Bones can be here or he can be far, but I reckon he's close enough to come if I whistle." She leaned down to peer into Selene's face. "You want me to fetch him?"

"No, no, Auntie, don't whistle for him," Selene begged. "I'll go away and I won't come back no more." While she spoke, she stared about wild-eyed,

searching the darkest shadows, as if Bloody Bones might be hiding behind a tree or a bush or a rock.

The moon came out then and shone full on Auntie's face. Her eyes were sunk deep in their sockets, her skin stretched tight across her skull. A few yellow teeth sat crooked in her lipless mouth and her nose was no more than sharp bone. She looked like she should be in her grave, not here in the woods.

She screeched with laughter and stuck her face so close to mine that I could smell her breath, rotten with decay. "Why, boy, I believe you ain't never seen the likes of me afore."

I backed away, stumbled over Bella, and fell flat. The dog whined and cowered beside me. Behind the old conjure woman, I saw something move in the woods, snapping branches under its feet, snuffling, rooting in the dead leaves.

Auntie laughed again, a wild whoop this time that echoed from tree to tree and bounced off rocks. "He's here," she hissed to Selene. "Old Bloody Bones hisself. Get yourselves away from here afore I send him after you both—and the dog, too."

In a swirl of skirt and shawl, Auntie turned her back and strode away. The wind picked up, the woods stirred. She was gone.

But instead of following her, Bloody Bones stepped out of the woods and into the moonlight. His head was a hog's skull, the rest of him bones. Taller than my father, he walked toward us on two feet. His ragged overalls fluttered about him as he raised his arms to show us the bear claws. Then he grinned to show us the panther's teeth. As he moved slowly toward us, a whistle sounded in the trees. His head swung toward the sound, and he snorted.

"Come to me, dear boy," Old Auntie called from somewhere in the woods. "Let them go for now, but if they come back, eat them."

With a grunt of disappointment, Bloody Bones turned away and lumbered into the dark.

Bella threw back her head and howled, the eeriest sound I'd ever heard a dog make. Turning to Selene, who still lay on the ground sobbing, the dog sniffed her cautiously, going over every inch of her, as if reading the fine print in a contract. Then, looking up at me, she licked the girl's cheek.

My heart pounded and my knees shook with fear, but I leaned over Selene. "You heard what she said," I told her. "We have to get out of here."

With Bella leading the way, Selene stumbled silently beside me, keeping a tight grip on the doll. When we got to the hollow, she looked at me. “I can’t see the cabin no more,” she said. “The lights are out and the chimney smoke’s gone.”

She ran to the broken window and peered inside. She seemed to see what I saw—a ruined cabin rotting away in the woods, full of shadows, dark and abandoned.

“Come on.” I held out my hand. “There’s nothing here for you or me now.”

In Auntie's Cabin Again

The old woman comes into the cabin and slams the door behind her. Her shadow rises up and rolls across the room before her. She's so angry, she slaps the girl across the face, hard enough to knock her out of the chair where she's been sleeping.

The girl cringes on the floor, covering her face with her hands. "Don't hit me no more, Auntie," she begs. "I ain't been sleeping long."

But the old woman picks up her stick and whacks the girl on the back. "Look there—you done let the fire go out! Cain't I trust you to do nothing right?"

The girl scrambles to her feet and tries to light the fire, but she's fumble-fingered with fear. Any minute Auntie will hit her again.

"Get out of my way." The old woman shoves the girl aside and squats to light the fire. She hears Selene crying outside, hears the boy dragging her away.

"Your brother come here to get you," she tells the girl. "But me and my dear boy chased him off. Don't make no difference. He's got hisself another sister now."

The girl stares at her, blank eyed. She doesn't have a brother. She's Auntie's girl. She's been here all her life. Just her and Auntie. Nobody else. Nobody except—except—her eyes go to the window. The pale face of Auntie's dear boy peers in at her. He grins and shows her his sharp teeth. But he's not her brother. Or is he? She doesn't know. She doesn't know anything.

The old woman sinks into her rocking chair and laughs at the girl's mystified face. "You ain't got no idea what I'm talking about, do you?" She feels like hitting her again. Or kicking her. Or throwing something at her. But she's tired from walking in the woods.

She leans toward the girl, baring her yellow teeth in a smile as hideous as the dear boy's wicked grin. "Your brother won't be back," she says. "My dear boy has scairt him off. But if 'n he does come back, you won't go with him 'cause you love your old auntie and you know she loves you."

She reaches out and pinches the girl's cheek. "Say you love me. Tell me, let me hear you."

Tears of pain fill the girl's eyes. "I love you so much, Auntie, more than anything." She wants to pull away from those fingers and their sharp nails, but if she does, Auntie will pinch harder.

"Tell me I'm good to you. Tell me I give you what you deserve."

"You're good to me, Auntie," she whispers. "You give me what I deserve."

The old woman releases her grip on the girl's cheek and settles back in her rocking chair. The fire flickers and casts dancing shadows on the walls and across the ceiling.

The girl crouches by the hearth. Over her head, three bats hang upside down, sleeping the winter away. Bundles of dry herbs dangle from the rafters. The girl hates their smell. The whole cabin reeks of deadly nightshade, henbane, hemlock, and foxglove—poisons, every one of them. Auntie makes potions from them, things that harm and hurt and sometimes kill.

She tells the girl about them and cackles. "I got me a bunch of names on a list, both the living and the dead. One by one I gets my revenge on them who done wrong to me."

In dark corners, black widows and other poisonous spiders lurk. The girl is afraid to sweep away their webs. She's also afraid of the scuttling noises the rats make. Sometimes she glimpses them darting across the floor from one corner to another. They're bigger than cats, and their teeth are long and sharp.

But most of all she's afraid of Bloody Bones. If she dared, she'd give him one of those little bottles of poison and kill him dead. That's how much she hates Auntie's dear boy.

But she doesn't hate Auntie. Oh, no. She loves Auntie. Auntie is all she has to keep her safe from Bloody Bones.

FOURTEEN

Bella led us eagerly down the path, never faltering, steering us deftly around rocks and roots and fallen branches. I'd lost the flashlight in the confusion and was grateful for the dog's sure footing.

All the way down Brewster's Hill, neither Selene nor I said one word. We didn't look behind us, for fear of what might be following us. Every noise made my heart pound. I thought I heard Bloody Bones snuffle, heard his hooves on the stones, smelled his hot, bloody breath, thought he was getting closer, closer. Soon he'd have us both, and Bella, too.

But when we came out of the woods at the bottom of Brewster's Hill, Bloody Bones was not behind us after all. Or if he had been, he wasn't there then. I paused and took a deep breath. Here on the edge of the field, with the house in sight, I felt almost safe. Bella licked my hand and wagged her tail. I watched her trot off toward Brody's house, sad to see her leave.

Selene's cold hand touched mine. She'd been crying silently. "I got no one now," she whispered. Her voice was like a song you hear in the dark just before you fall asleep.

I squeezed her hand and felt its tiny bones shift in my grip. People were so fragile, so easily broken, so hard to put back together. "Mr. and Mrs. O'Neill will take care of you," I told her.

Selene said nothing, but she let me lead her across the field toward the farmhouse.

The back porch light lit the yard like a spotlight. Before I opened the door, Dad threw it wide. "Where have you been?" he shouted. "Aren't we worried enough without your going off somewhere without a word to anybody?"

His eyes lit on Selene. "Is this the girl your mother was talking about?"

I nodded and squeezed Selene's cold hand. "She ran away, and I went to find her."

Mom came into the kitchen, followed by the O'Neills. Looking at Selene with hostility, Mom said, "She took the doll with her. And she's wearing your clothes, Daniel."

“Now, Martha.” Mrs. O’Neill patted Mom’s shoulder in an effort to calm her. “What have I been telling you?”

“Nothing I believe.” Mom never took her eyes off Selene. “What’s your name?”

“Girl.” Selene lowered her head. She was so pale and so little and so skinny—how could Mom be so mean to her?

Mom scowled down at Selene. “Your real name. Tell me your *real* name. Tell me who you are.”

“I’m his sister now.”

Mom seemed too stunned to speak, but Dad said, “You are not my son’s sister!”

“That’s what Auntie said,” Selene whispered. “I’m to be his sister now. To take the place of the other.”

Before Mom or Dad could say more, Mr. O’Neill knelt beside Selene and studied her face. “I knew you a long time ago, Selene. You lived right here in this house. You were friends with my daughter Eleanor. I knew your parents, too. Do you remember my wife and me?”

“I never lived here,” Selene told Mr. O’Neill, obviously confused. “I don’t have no mama or daddy. No friends, either. I’ve lived my whole life long with Auntie. But she don’t want me anymore.”

Pointing at me, she added, “Auntie says I’m to be his sister now. And I’ll be hurt bad if I come back to the cabin looking to be with her again.”

“I can’t take this anymore.” Mom left the kitchen and clattered up the back stairs. We all heard her bedroom door slam shut. It was just like before, only this time she didn’t take the doll.

“Will you please tell me what’s going on, Daniel?” Dad asked.

I did my best to explain it, but I knew I was losing him. He kept interrupting and saying, “This is ridiculous. Do you expect me to believe you?”

Mr. O’Neill sighed. “I tried to tell you, Ted.”

Dad turned his back and followed Mom upstairs. The O’Neills, Selene, and I were left in the kitchen. I had no idea what to say or do.

Mrs. O’Neill sat down and lifted Selene into her lap. The girl leaned against Mrs. O’Neill and pressed her face against the woman’s body. Little Erica stared over her shoulder, her blank blue eyes focused on nothing.

“Do you remember anything about this house?” Mrs. O’Neill asked Selene. “Your mama or your daddy?”

Selene shook her head. “I been tellin’ you and tellin’ you. I’m Auntie’s girl.”

“But not anymore,” Mrs. O’Neill said.

Selene didn’t say anything.

“She’s almost asleep, poor thing,” Mr. O’Neill murmured.

“How about we take her to our house?” Mrs. O’Neill asked me, as if she expected me to make the decision. “The very sight of her upsets your mother and angers your father.”

“Maybe that would be best,” I said.

I found a spare blanket and gave it to Mr. O’Neill. He wrapped it around Selene and carried her out to the car.

I stood on the back porch, shivering in the cold. “Just make sure she doesn’t run off,” I called. “She’d freeze to death in those woods.”

“Don’t worry,” Mr. O’Neill said. “We’ll keep her safe.”

“Come by and see us tomorrow,” Mrs. O’Neill added. “I’ve got things to talk about with you.”

I watched the car turn and head down the driveway. When its taillights disappeared around a curve, I went back inside. I was so tired—so, so tired. So sad. My head ached, as if my brain were about to explode from trying to understand what I’d seen in the woods. It couldn’t be true. It was true. It couldn’t be. It was.

The next morning, I woke up early, ate breakfast, and left a note telling Mom and Dad I was at the O’Neills’ house. It was cold, and the sky was a solid light gray, so heavy with clouds that the sun couldn’t break through. It felt as if snow was coming. Maybe it was better to think of Erica being with Old Auntie than to imagine her wandering in the woods, lost and cold and hungry.

I saw Brody at the end of our driveway. He was wearing his suede jacket and a pair of filthy pink tennis shoes with holes in the toes.

Bella was with him, trotting along the edge of the road and sniffing in the weeds. When she saw me, she ran up and wagged her tail.

“Did you go to the cabin?” Brody asked. “Was Selene there?”

I looked up from petting Bella and nodded. “She swore Erica was inside, but all I saw were ruins, looking just like they always have.”

“Did you see Old Auntie?”

“I was never so scared in my whole life. She’s, she’s—” I couldn’t say any more for fear of somehow bringing her to me.

Wiping his nose on the sleeve of his jacket, Brody stared at me. “What did she do? What did she say?”

“She told me to take Selene home. She said she’s my sister now.”

“That girl don’t want to be your sister.” Brody spat on the ground.

“She wants to be with Auntie, but Auntie says that if Selene comes near the cabin, she’ll sic Bloody Bones on her.”

Brody’s eyes widened. “Did you see him?”

I stared off into the woods and tried not to think about what I’d seen. “He’s horrible, just like you said.”

“Did he chase you?”

“No. He stood there and looked at us, and then Old Auntie whistled for him.”

Brody sucked in his cheeks and let his breath out in a puff of air. “You must be really brave or really stupid, I’m not sure which, but I’m glad you brung my dog home safe.”

With Bella between us, we stood on the edge of the road for a while, staring at the trees, as if we expected to see Bloody Bones or Old Auntie. A red-tailed hawk soared overhead, dark against the pale sky, and the wind picked up. It looked more like snow than ever. You could practically smell it in the wind.

“Is Selene at your house?” Brody asked.

I shook my head. “The O’Neills took her home with them last night. That’s where I’m going.”

“Can I come with you? I want to see that girl.”

He and I and the dog walked on down the road. Snow began falling. Bella snapped at the flakes, and Brody opened his mouth like a kid and caught snow on his tongue. Even though I was half crazy with worry about my sister, I did the same. I’ve always loved the way snow feels on my tongue.

When we got to the O’Neills’ house, the snow was at least half an inch deep, falling fast and thick now, making it hard to see. Trees blurred, fields blended in with the sky, and the house was no more than a faint outline against the smudge of woods behind it.

Mrs. O’Neill opened the door wide and let us all in, even Bella, who immediately made herself at home in front of the fire. “You must be

freezing," she said.

Brody stopped in the living room doorway and stared at Selene, who was sitting on a couch beside Mr. O'Neill. A photo album lay open in his lap, but she seemed more interested in combing Little Erica's hair than in looking at the pictures. She didn't appear to notice the dog, Brody, or me.

"Get those wet shoes off, boys, and dry your feet by the fire," Mr. O'Neill said. "How's your father doing, Brody?"

"'Bout the same." Brody busied himself taking off his shoes and laying them carefully on the hearth. He'd already shed his jacket and hung it on the back of a wooden chair in the corner. "He ain't found a job yet."

I put my hiking boots beside his worn-out tennis shoes. It always makes me feel guilty to have better stuff than other people. Something's wrong with a world that lets me have waterproof boots and someone else have tennis shoes with holes in the toes.

I looked at Selene, but she kept her eyes on the doll. Mr. O'Neill nudged her. "Aren't you going to say hello to Daniel? You haven't met Brody before—he lives on the other side of your old home, just over the bridge."

Without looking at either one of us, she shook her head. She wore a gray plaid dress and a dark green sweater. Her hair had been combed until it was free of tangles. If you didn't look too closely, you'd think Selene was a perfectly normal girl. Maybe a little shy, but nothing out of the ordinary.

When she finally raised her head and stared at us with those pale green eyes, you could see right away that she was different, not normal after all, a wild child with wild ways.

Brody actually took a step back when he saw Selene's pale, pointed face and her fierce eyes. For a moment I thought he was going to grab his jacket and shoes and leave, but he stayed where he was, wiping his nose and staring at the girl.

Ignoring Brody's reaction to Selene, Mr. O'Neill motioned to us to join him. "I'm showing Selene some pictures. Maybe you'd like to see them too."

I sat beside him, on the opposite side from Selene. Brody perched next to me on the arm of the sofa, ready to head for home if he needed to. He was a little wild himself, but nothing like Selene.

"This is my daughter's first-grade class picture." Mr. O'Neill pointed at a tall dark-haired girl in the back row of a faded black-and-white print.

“That’s Eleanor.” Glancing at Selene, he moved his finger slowly to a child sitting in the middle of the front row. “And this is Selene.”

Selene faced the camera, a big grin on her face. Like the other girls, she wore a dress with a round collar, very much like the one she was wearing now. Her curly red hair touched her shoulders.

Brody leaned past me to see. “It’s her all right.”

We both looked at Selene. With her face turned away from the photo album, she continued to comb Little Erica’s hair.

“Selene disappeared not long after that picture was taken,” Mr. O’Neill went on. “I’ve been showing her photos taken here at our house.”

I looked at a page of snapshots of Selene and Eleanor. It was hard to believe that the frightened, unhappy kid sitting with us on the sofa had once hung upside down by her knees from a tree limb, ridden a bike, splashed in a swimming pool, and made silly faces.

“This is Selene’s mother.” Mr. O’Neill pointed to a pretty woman pulling both girls on a sled on a snowy day and smiling at the camera. “And her father. See? That’s Selene on her dad’s shoulders. She must have been two or three.”

Mrs. O’Neill joined us then. “Don’t you want to look at the pictures, Selene?” she asked gently. “It might help you remember your family—and who you are.”

Keeping her head down, Selene said, “I know who I am.”

“These were taken at Eleanor’s seventh birthday party.” Mr. O’Neill turned the page and moved the album closer to Selene, but she slid off the sofa and sat in a rocking chair by the fire.

Mrs. O’Neill smiled. “It was November, but unseasonably warm, so the children played outside. Look, here’s Selene. I still remember that pretty blue dress—she was so adorable. And so happy.” She paused a moment and turned to Brody. “Look at this—it’s your uncle Silas.”

Brody leaned closer to stare at the skinny boy in the photo. “Whew, he sure don’t look like that now—bald and fat. Got a scruffy old beard and spends most of his time down at the tavern on State Street.”

“Here’s your dad. See? Right there beside Silas.”

Brody squinted at the slightly blurry face of a five-year-old. “Now, he ain’t changed so much, except for his hair, which is mostly gone. He’s still skinny as a fence post.”

Mrs. O'Neill's eyes returned to Selene in her blue dress. She was backlit by the sun, and her hair glowed in its light. "A week after the party, Selene disappeared," she told us. "Eleanor cried for weeks. She's never forgotten Selene or gotten over her disappearance."

We all looked at the girl across the room. Humming to herself, she rocked the doll. She might as well have been alone, for all the attention she paid us.

Mr. O'Neill closed the album and laid it gently on the table. "I was hoping," he said wearily, "that seeing the pictures might make her remember, but I guess not."

He excused himself, saying he had work to do in his shop. "I'm building a dollhouse for my granddaughter—still hoping to finish it in time for her birthday. Maybe I'll build the next one for Selene."

Mrs. O'Neill beckoned to Brody and me. "You boys, come along with me."

We followed her down a narrow hall to the kitchen. It was big and modern, the kind of place Mom wanted so badly. I looked through a sliding glass door to an outside deck. The snow was about an inch and a half deep on the railing and still falling. The mountains had vanished behind a white curtain, and the woods were hard to see. Erica was out there somewhere.

"I told you last night I wanted to talk to you, Daniel," Mrs. O'Neill said. "You, too, Brody."

She sat on a stool at the counter, and we perched on either side of her. "First of all," she said, "I've called Eleanor and told her the news. If the snow doesn't keep her from coming, she'll be here one day this week. Maybe, just maybe, she'll find a way to communicate with Selene."

"But what about Erica?" I asked. "Now that we know where she is, can we get her back?"

Turning to Brody, Mrs. O'Neill asked him what he knew about an old woman who lived down at the end of Railroad Avenue.

"Miss Perkins?" Brody hunched his shoulders. "She's crazy, that's what. Nobody has nothing to do with her unless it's something secret, like, like—well, I don't exactly know what—except every cat and dog that goes missing ends up in her stew pot. And maybe other things, too."

"Yes, I've heard plenty of stories myself." Mrs. O'Neill paused. "But I've also heard she's a descendant of Old Auntie and knows a thing or two about conjuring herself."

Brody folded his arms across his skinny chest, hiding the puppy face that was knitted into the moth-eaten sweater he wore. “Not to be rude or nothing, but I ain’t going near that old lady. And you shouldn’t either.”

Mrs. O’Neill turned to me. “How about you, Daniel?”

What choice did I have? If I refused, it would be like saying I didn’t care what happened to my sister. “As long as somebody comes with me,” I said. “I’ll go.”

I heard a whisper of sound behind me and turned to see Selene standing in the doorway. “Can I come too?”

“Oh, no, Selene,” Mrs. O’Neill said. “This woman—”

“I heard you say she’s kin to Auntie. Maybe she can change me for that other girl, the new one she got to help her. Then everybody’d be happy. They all want the new one back, and no one wants me.”

Mrs. O’Neill studied the girl’s pale face. “Oh, Selene, that’s not true. Of course we want Erica back, but we don’t want to lose you.”

“You got to take me to see her, you got to!” Selene cried. “She’s my onliest chance to see Auntie again.”

“Maybe you should be there,” Mrs. O’Neill said slowly. “Maybe Miss Perkins should see you.”

Selene leaned against the doorframe. Holding the doll tightly, she hummed to herself. It was the same tune I’d heard Erica hum, a strange, sad song, like an old ballad, but without words.

I turned away from the girl’s sad face. Sometimes I couldn’t bear to look at her. What if my sister came back in fifty years, looking just like Selene?

“When should we go see Miss Perkins?” I asked Mrs. O’Neill.

She went to the sliding doors and peered out. “The snow’s letting up,” she said. “If the roads are plowed tonight, we can go to Woodville tomorrow.”

She was right. I could see the mountains again, as soft against the sky as clouds resting on earth. The trunks of trees in the woods were smudged charcoal lines on white paper.

“I ain’t going with you,” Brody said, “so don’t bother to ask.”

Nobody argued with him. It was bad enough that Selene was coming. We didn’t need Brody, too.

He joined Mrs. O’Neill at the door and pressed his nose against the glass, making a big smear. “Bella and me should get on home soon.” He didn’t make a move to get his jacket or the dog, but stood watching the snow.

“Let me give you lunch first. How about grilled cheese sandwiches and hot chocolate?”

While Mrs. O’Neill fixed the sandwiches, Selene stood at the window, her back to us. From the way she held Little Erica up to the glass, I guessed she was showing her the snow.

Mrs. O’Neill set sandwiches and hot chocolate on the counter and called Selene.

“I don’t want to eat with them boys.” She didn’t turn around, but stayed at the window, her back to the room.

“Well, how about if I seat you at the breakfast table over by the window?”

Selene agreed to that, but made sure her chair faced the window, not us.

After we’d eaten, Brody thanked Mrs. O’Neill for lunch. “I really ought to go home before my daddy starts in to worrying about me.”

I said goodbye to the O’Neills and followed Brody outside. There must have been six inches of snow on the ground, and it was still falling. Bella leaped and danced ahead of us, barking as if the snow were the best thing she’d ever seen. My father always said it didn’t take much to make a dog happy. Bella was certainly proof of that.

FIFTEEN

I let myself into the house quietly. No fire in the living room, no smell of cooking, but I heard low voices in the kitchen. Mom and Dad were sitting at the table, their breakfast dishes pushed to one side. Last night's pots and pans and dishes filled the sink.

Caught by surprise, they looked at me as if I were a stranger. "Daniel," Dad said. "We thought you'd stay overnight with the O'Neills. The snow and all—" He waved a hand vaguely at the window.

"It's almost stopped."

Mom turned her attention from me to her coffee. I'd never seen her look so bad. Her hair was limp and uncombed, her face shadowed with grief. She wore an old UMass sweatshirt and baggy corduroy pants, the same clothes she'd worn since Erica disappeared.

Dad hadn't shaved, and gray stubble covered his cheeks. His eyes were puffy and red rimmed. He wore a navy sweatshirt and sweatpants, an outfit he usually reserved for watching TV after dinner.

There was an empty wine bottle on the table and an ashtray full of cigarette butts and ashes.

"What's going on?" I asked, fearful that something bad had happened—they'd found Erica dead in the snow or frozen in the woods or, or . . .

"Nothing," Dad said. "Nothing is going on. Nothing has changed. She's still missing, and no one wants to look for her in this snow."

"They don't want to look for her at all," Mom said. "Even the state police say it's hopeless." She lit a cigarette and inhaled so deeply that she coughed.

"Please don't smoke," Dad said. "You know I hate it."

"I'll smoke if I want to." She gave him a nasty look. "It calms my nerves."

Dad shoved his chair away from the table and started up the back stairs.

"Where are you going, Ted?" Mom called.

"To check my email. Just in case—"

"Just in case what?"

"Just in case . . ." He didn't finish the sentence.

“Face it, we’ll never see her again.” Mom started crying.

Dad went to his den and slammed the door.

My parents had lost their minds. Their marriage was collapsing. The only way to fix things was to find Erica and bring her home. And no one could do that except me.

The next day was gray and cloudy, and the snow was pockmarked with drops falling from trees. School wasn’t closed, but Mom said she didn’t want me going back yet. That was fine with me.

“The kids and the teachers will torment you with questions,” she said. “I don’t want them making you even more miserable. People are so insensitive at times like this.”

“Is it okay if I go to Woodville with Mrs. O’Neill? She knows someone who might be able to help Selene.”

Mom shrugged. “Go ahead, do what you want, but please tell Mrs. O’Neill I want Erica’s doll returned.”

Her voice sounded mean and hard again. The mother I used to know had disappeared with Erica.

Mom went to the kitchen and stood at the window, smoking and watching the woods, as if she were waiting to see Erica run toward the house. Dad was working at his computer. He’d set up a website in hope of getting in touch with someone who’d seen Erica. He had lots of hits, all worthless. A man had seen her in a diner in Kentucky; a woman had seen her in a Walmart in Tennessee. Someone else saw her waving frantically from the rear window of a car on I-95 North. She was in Alaska, Italy, California. On buses, planes, trains. Those who hadn’t seen her either prayed for her or accused my father of faking the disappearance. Maybe he’d murdered her. Maybe he wanted money. Yet Dad checked every one of them and alerted the police when he received a sighting.

With no one to talk to and nothing to do, I spent most of the day in my room, playing games on my iPad to keep from blaming myself over and over again for Erica’s disappearance. Why hadn’t I let her pick up the doll? Why? Why?

The phone rang around two. It was Mrs. O’Neill. She’d come by for me in half an hour, if that was okay with my parents. I told her it was fine. I didn’t say they probably wouldn’t even notice I was gone.

When Mrs. O'Neill arrived, she handed me the clothes Selene had helped herself to. I left them on the porch so I wouldn't have to go back inside, where my parents were arguing endlessly over whose fault it was.

I sat in the front seat, and Selene sat in the back. I guessed she was wearing clothes Eleanor had worn when she was little—a blue jacket with a belt and a fake fur collar, corduroy jeans, and a pair of yellow rubber boots. Selene didn't look at me, but kept her head bent over the doll. Nothing unusual about that.

Railroad Avenue was in the worst part of Woodville. We passed taverns, boarded-up stores, an abandoned gas station. A stray dog poked its nose into overflowing garbage cans that were half buried in snow. Newspapers blew down the icy sidewalks. A few people came in and out of a shabby market.

Mrs. O'Neill drove slowly, looking for the house number. "Forty-eight eleven," she said. "This is it."

She parked in front of a shabby little house that was badly in need of paint. The roof sagged under the weight of the snow. No one had shoveled the walk. No footprints led to the door.

"Do you think she's home?" I asked.

"Let's find out." Mrs. O'Neill picked up Selene and led the way to the porch through knee-deep snow.

Not a sound from inside. She pressed the bell, waited awhile, and tried again.

"Maybe it's broken," I said.

She nodded and knocked. Once, twice, several times. I shivered from cold and maybe a little fear. The house was rundown and dark. One window was covered with a sheet of plastic, another boarded up. The porch buckled under our feet. The walls were sprayed with gang tags and badly drawn pictures of witches and devils and monsters.

Just as we were about to give up, the door opened a crack and a woman peered out. She was not just old—she was ancient. Bent and bony, no bigger than Selene, her flyaway white hair floated around her head like dandelions gone to seed. She'd wrapped herself in a thick knitted shawl of every imaginable color woven into complex patterns—a sun here, a moon there, stars all over, rivers and trees and birds and animals. A person could look at it all day and still find something he hadn't noticed before.

"What do you want with me?" she croaked. Her eyes glittered in her shadowy face.

Mrs. O'Neill put Selene down and held out her hand. "I'm Irene O'Neill, and I've come to you for help." The old woman looked at her hand, but didn't take it.

"I don't help strangers." She was about to slam the door in our faces.

"Wait, don't be so hasty!" Mrs. O'Neill pushed Selene forward. "What if I told you this girl is Selene Estes? Would you help us then?"

Miss Perkins froze. Instead of slamming the door, she leaned out and peered down at Selene, studying her as if she were a book she needed to learn. She touched Selene's cheek, stared into her eyes, examined a strand of her hair. I think she even sniffed her. Shaking her head, she mumbled and muttered to herself and gazed over Selene's head at the darkening sky.

At last she spoke to Mrs. O'Neill. "I smell Auntie on this here girl. I feel her touch."

Selene tugged at Miss Perkins's arm. "Can you make her take me back, ma'am? I'm still strong. I can do the work."

"Go back to Auntie? Whatever for?"

"She told me to go live someplace else, she was done with me. But I ain't done with her."

When Selene began to sob, Mrs. O'Neill tried to comfort her, but the girl pulled away. "Leave me be," she cried. "I don't want nobody but Auntie!"

"I reckon you better come inside." Miss Perkins opened the door wide, and we followed her into a dark hallway. The house smelled of mildew and mold and cat pee. An old carpet, stained and worn through in spots, covered the floor. Bulging boxes and bundles stood in piles and stacks against the walls. It was a good thing Miss Perkins was a skinny little woman. A normal-size person would need to turn sideways to squeeze down that hall.

At the top of a flight of steps, several cats stared down at us. Others crouched on the stacks of boxes. A few more wound around our ankles, meowing.

To our left, raggedy velvet curtains framed a doorway into a small room that was also filled with bundles and boxes, with just enough space left for a sagging couch and a rocking chair. The windows were covered with blinds. A small fire burned on the hearth, barely enough to light the room, even though it wasn't much past three o'clock.

"Set there on the sofa," Miss Perkins said as she took a seat in the rocking chair.

Displacing more cats, the three of us crowded onto the sofa, Selene on one side of Mrs. O'Neill and me on the other. Pressed close to her, I felt the tension in her body. I was tense too. Scared, even. The house reeked of dark secrets, of sorrow and misery. I understood why Brody had refused to come with us.

I glanced at Selene. She hadn't stopped staring at Miss Perkins. Maybe not even to blink. She and the doll had the same blank-eyed look on their faces.

"Now then," Miss Perkins said to Mrs. O'Neill. "Here's the way I see it. Auntie must have took the boy's sister when she let Selene go. She'll work his sister fifty years, and then, when she's worn-out like this one, she'll let her go and take another girl."

"I ain't worn-out. I can still do the work," Selene insisted.

Miss Perkins ignored Selene. Closing her eyes, she rocked in her chair for a few moments, nodding to herself, clasping and unclasping her hands. "You won't like it, but here's the truth of it," she said. "Auntie's been doing this for over two hundred years now. She's got no reason to quit, and I ain't got the power to stop her."

I peered into the old woman's face. Her eyes, hidden by drooping lids and wrinkles, were set way back in her skull, so I couldn't guess what she was thinking or even be sure where she was looking.

"Please," I whispered. "There must be something you can do to get Erica back. My parents are going crazy."

Firelight danced across her face, making her wrinkles stand out as if they'd been carved into her skin. "What on earth do you want me to do, boy?"

"Can't you trade Selene back?"

"Daniel!" Mrs. O'Neill turned to me, obviously shocked. "You can't mean that."

"It's what Selene wants," I told her, surprised at her disapproval of my idea. "She said so herself. She wants to be with Auntie."

Before Mrs. O'Neill could say a word, Miss Perkins said, "Didn't I just tell you—that girl is worn-out, used up. She's no good to Auntie—which is why she took your sister."

"Just take me to her," Selene begged. "Give me a chance to show her I can still do the chores."

Miss Perkins shook her head. “I know it ain’t easy, but you got to make the best of your life here.”

The old woman sat back in the rocker, her face now hidden in shadows. She was quiet for so long that I thought she’d fallen asleep. I looked at Mrs. O’Neill and whispered, “Should we leave?”

Miss Perkins must have heard me. “I ain’t sleeping. I’m pondering.” With surprising energy, she pushed herself up and out of the rocking chair. “You all come back here tomorrow afternoon. By then I might have an idea or two.”

She walked to the door with us and watched Mrs. O’Neill help Selene with zippers and mittens. “The poor child,” Miss Perkins said softly. “She’s under a spell, like that girl who come back fifty year ago and died in the orphanage. When Auntie lets them go, they ain’t long for this world.”

Mrs. O’Neill stared at the old woman. “Please don’t talk like that in front of the child.”

Selene didn’t seem to have heard. She was standing with her back to us, watching the cats racing each other up and down the steps.

Miss Perkins sighed. “Ain’t none of that girl’s fault my auntie took her. Must be something I can do to stop that old woman, her and that hog of hers.”

She opened the door and ushered us out. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

With that, we were on the porch with the door shut behind us. It was dark now, and the sliver of moon high above us didn’t do much to light our way down the icy sidewalk to the car.

“Well,” Mrs. O’Neill said as she started the engine. “I don’t know what to make of the old woman.”

“Do you trust her?” I asked.

Mrs. O’Neill bit her lower lip and eased the car over the ruts in the icy road. In the headlights I saw a skinny dog running along the sidewalk. He had something in his mouth—a scrap he’d found in the garbage, I guessed.

“I’m truly hoping she can get your sister back. How, I don’t know—just so it doesn’t involve trading one child for another.”

She paused as she turned right from Railroad Avenue onto Main Street. It was only five o’clock, but not a single store was open. Except for the streetlights and a traffic light set on blinking red, the town was dark.

“I’m also hoping we can keep Selene with us for a long time,” she said.

I looked over my shoulder at the back seat. Selene was staring out the window, watching the buildings and houses slip past. Her face was pale and sad. The doll lay beside her as if she didn't care about it anymore. I think she knew then that she'd never see Auntie again.

SIXTEEN

As Mrs. O'Neill pulled her car into my driveway, she asked me if I'd like to have dinner at her house. "My daughter Eleanor will be here," she said. "It should be interesting to see what happens between her and Selene."

While Mrs. O'Neill and Selene waited, I ran into the house to ask permission. Dad was sitting on the couch by himself, staring into the fire. The room was dark.

Barely acknowledging me, he nodded. "Sure, sure, go ahead. I don't think your mother plans on cooking anything tonight."

"Where is she?"

He shrugged. "Upstairs, taking a nap."

"At five thirty?"

"Go on, Daniel. Don't keep Mrs. O'Neill waiting." He poured himself a glass of wine and went back to staring into the fire.

On the way out, I glanced upstairs, wondering if I should check on Mom. I decided against it and ran from the house to the warm car. Was this how it was going to be from now on? Mom upstairs sleeping, Dad drinking wine in the dark? I had to get my sister back.

"Is everything okay?" Mrs. O'Neill asked.

"Fine." I kept my head turned so she wouldn't see my face. One sympathetic look and I'd break down and tell her everything.

At the O'Neills' house, lights shone from windows and woodsmoke rose from the chimney into the cold night. Mrs. O'Neill helped Selene out of the car and led us inside. From the sounds and smells, I figured that Mr. O'Neill was busy in the kitchen. A tall gray-haired woman waited in the hallway as we took off our coats and jackets, scarves and hats and mittens. While she hugged her mother, Eleanor stared at Selene. She was so pale, I thought she might faint dead away.

Selene didn't so much as glance at Eleanor. Turning her back on all of us, she went into the living room, sat down near the fire, and began whispering to Little Erica.

"My God, Mother," Eleanor whispered. "She's fifty-seven years old, but she looks like she did on the day she disappeared. How can that be?"

“I warned you,” Mrs. O’Neill said.

Eleanor took her mother’s arm. I could almost smell her fear and confusion. “Do you think she’ll remember me?”

“Maybe you should go sit beside her and tell her who you are.”

Eleanor looked so scared, you’d have thought Selene was a ghost—which in a way I guessed she was, a girl come back from the dead unchanged.

“What’s the matter?” Mrs. O’Neill asked.

Eleanor bit her lip just the way her mother did when she was nervous. “It’s a shock, Mom, seeing her again, looking exactly the same. I recognize her, but how can she possibly recognize me?” She glanced uneasily at the child in the living room. “I don’t know what to say, what to do.”

“Selene needs our help, Eleanor. She’s so unhappy, I fear she’ll fade away from us altogether if we don’t reach her.” Mrs. O’Neill patted her daughter’s arm. “Why don’t you talk to her awhile—win her trust, maybe.”

I watched Eleanor cross the room slowly. Sitting on the floor beside Selene, she smiled at her. “I’m Mrs. O’Neill’s daughter Eleanor,” she told her. “What’s your name?”

Without looking at Eleanor, Selene said, “I’m called Girl.”

Eleanor sent her mother an anxious glance. “I had a friend when I was your age,” she told Selene. “She looked just like you.”

“It wasn’t me, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Her name was Selene, and she lived right up the road. We played together every day.”

“Well, I ain’t never played with nobody. I worked every day and half the night for Auntie.”

Eleanor glanced at her mother again. Mrs. O’Neill joined the two of them in front of the fire. “Try to remember, Selene,” she said gently. “You spent the first seven years of your life playing with Eleanor—hopscotch and jump rope and—”

Selene jumped to her feet, her face flushed with anger. “I declare I’m sick to death of hearing about that girl! My name ain’t Selene. How many times I got to tell you?”

Mrs. O’Neill reached out to pat Selene’s shoulder, but the girl pulled away from her. “Leave me be!”

Jumping to her feet, Selene ran from the room and up the stairs. Overhead, a door slammed shut.

Mrs. O'Neill started to go after her, but Eleanor stopped her. "You heard her, Mom. She wants us to leave her alone."

Mrs. O'Neill looked upstairs. Even with the door shut, we could hear Selene crying. "She's so unhappy, so confused. She needs someone to help her remember who she is."

"I don't know who she is, but she's not Selene," Eleanor said. "She can't be—it's simply not possible."

I could tell that Eleanor's attitude disappointed her mother. "You grew up here," Mrs. O'Neill said. "You know about Old Auntie. She's turned Selene loose and taken Daniel's sister."

"I'm sorry, but I don't believe those old stories anymore. Maybe that girl was abandoned in the woods and raised by wild animals. That's no more far-fetched than your explanation. Call Social Services. They'll know what to do."

Mrs. O'Neill stared at her daughter as if she didn't know her. "And let the child die like the one before her?"

Eleanor gathered up her coat and her purse. "I'm going home. Call me when you come to your senses."

Mr. O'Neill came in from the kitchen, wearing his chef's apron. "What's going on?" he said. "Surely you're not leaving before we eat. I roasted a chicken and made your favorite dressing."

But Eleanor went on zipping her parka. Her face was determined. "I'm sorry, Dad, but I can't stay in the same house with that girl. It's too upsetting."

"We were hoping you could help her," he said.

"There's nothing I can do for her." Eleanor took her mother's hands in hers. "Please hand her over to the authorities."

Mrs. O'Neill shook her head. "I can't do that. I *won't* do that. Selene stays here."

Eleanor released her mother's hands. "All right, do what you think is best, but don't ask me to be involved." She went to the kitchen door, but before she opened it, she looked at her parents. "I'm sorry, I really am, but there's something very wrong with that child, and it scares me."

As Eleanor stepped out into the cold, dark night, Mrs. O'Neill followed her to the door, as if she meant to call her back.

Mr. O'Neill stopped her. "Give her time," he said. "Let her think about this. For fifty years she's believed that Selene was dead. And now—put

yourself in Eleanor's place."

Mrs. O'Neill sighed. "Well, dinner is ready for those who want to eat."

Mr. O'Neill went to the foot of the stairs and called Selene. Silence. He called again. And again. After three tries, he climbed the steps and knocked on a door.

"Selene, dinner's ready. Come down and join us."

"I ain't hungry," she answered.

"It's roast chicken and mashed potatoes and green beans."

"I said I ain't hungry."

"We'll save some for you," he said.

While we ate, I glanced at the empty places set for Eleanor and Selene. I wished Eleanor had stayed and tried harder, but maybe Mr. O'Neill was right and she'd change her mind. I wished that Selene was sitting at her place, eating her food, and behaving like a normal girl.

But most of all, I wished that Erica was sitting beside me.

After dinner, Mr. O'Neill offered to drive me home. When we were alone in the car, he asked me how my folks were doing.

"Okay, I guess."

He looked at me. "Okay, you guess? That doesn't sound good."

We were heading down the driveway toward our house, which stood out stark and gray against the snowy fields. One light shone in Mom and Dad's bedroom window. The clock on the dashboard said eight fifteen. Too early for them to be in bed.

Mr. O'Neill parked beside the back porch. To my surprise, he walked up the steps with me. The door wasn't locked—in case Erica came home, Mom said.

"Dad? Mom?" I called. "It's me."

Nobody answered. The kitchen was dark and cold.

Mr. O'Neill went to the foot of the back stairs and called, "Ted, you up there?"

A door opened, and light from Dad's study spilled down the steps. "John, is that you?"

"Yep, I brought your boy home."

Dad appeared at the top of the steps, backlit so we couldn't see his face. "Good of you," he said to Mr. O'Neill. "Thanks. I hope he wasn't a nuisance."

"Oh, no, not at all. Daniel's no trouble."

I turned on the kitchen light and watched Dad come downstairs. "Where's Mom?" I asked.

"In bed, reading." He went to the cupboard and pulled out a whiskey bottle. "Have a drink, John."

Mr. O'Neill sat at the table, and Dad filled a couple of glasses. I opened a can of soda and started to join them, but Dad told me to go up to bed. I started to protest, but changed my mind and did what he said. Maybe a talk with Mr. O'Neill would be good for him.

Before I went to my room, I knocked on Mom's door. "It's me, Daniel," I called softly. "Are you awake?"

"Come in," she said.

"Are you all right?" I asked. She didn't look all right—hair still uncombed, bags under her eyes, dressed in an old bathrobe over her pajamas. Huddled under blankets and quilts, she had the look of an invalid.

"Of course I am. Why do you ask?"

I shrugged, embarrassed. "You don't usually go to bed this early."

"The house is so cold. I can't get warm anywhere but here." She looked around the room. "Why did we move here? Why did I let your father talk me into it?" She pulled the covers up around her shoulders and stared at the black night pressing against the windows.

"Mom," I said. "I—"

"Who's downstairs with your father?" she interrupted.

"Mr. O'Neill. He brought me home."

"Did you see that girl at their house?"

"Yes. She's staying with them."

"She belongs in an institution." Mom handed me an empty wineglass. "Make yourself useful, Daniel. Go fill this up for me. Red, not white. I hate white wine in the winter."

I backed away from her, but she was staring out the window again. "Do you think she's out there somewhere? Will she come back? Will we see her again?" She began to cry. "I can't stand this. I can't bear it. I want my daughter. I want Erica!"

"Mom—"

"Go to bed, Daniel. Let me alone, please, just go away."

"But what about—" I held up the wineglass.

"No. I changed my mind. I don't want it." She lay down and hid her face in her pillows.

“Well, good night,” I said.

When she didn’t answer, I left the room and closed the door. What was I supposed to do? Nothing was right in our house. Not even me.

SEVENTEEN

The next day, Mrs. O'Neill picked me up around three. Selene huddled in the back seat, hugging the doll, her face mournful. Snowflakes drifted in the gray air, floating up and down, swirling like tiny moths.

By the time we parked in front of Miss Perkins's house, an inch of fluffy snow coated the old snow, making it look fresh and new. We walked to the front door silently. No one had said much during the ride into Woodville. I think we were each locked in our own thoughts, wondering what Miss Perkins might tell us. Each of us hoping, hoping, hoping . . .

We waited on the cold porch for at least five minutes before the door opened and Miss Perkins stepped aside to let us enter. Three cats shot out of the house and two ran in.

Inside, it was as dark and cold and smelly as before. A small fire burned low on the hearth, but we didn't take off our coats.

For a while, no one spoke. It was as if we were waiting for Miss Perkins to tell us something and she was waiting for us to tell her something. A black cat crept into her lap, and two more emerged from the shadows to crouch at her feet. They watched us steadily, unblinking. I wondered how she told them apart.

The fire popped and crackled, and the wind did its best to squeeze in through every crack. Selene coughed. Mrs. O'Neill crossed and uncrossed her ankles. Somewhere in the back of the house, a cat yowled. *There must be dozens of them*, I thought, mostly black, gray, and dark tabbies.

"This is how it is," Miss Perkins said suddenly. "Selene, there's no way you can go back to my auntie. She don't want you no more. You must learn to live in the here and now—or die. Them's your choices. If I was you, I'd choose to live."

Tears ran down Selene's face, but she said nothing. She simply sat and stared as if she were a cat too, half wild, not one you dared to pet.

Miss Perkins turned her eyes to me. "She means to keep your sister for fifty years," she said, "just like she kept Selene and all the ones before her."

"There must be something you can do," I whispered. "My family is wrecked. My mother, my father—" I couldn't go on without losing my self-

control and throwing myself at her feet, crying and begging for her help.

"I didn't say there's no way to get your sister back." Miss Perkins spoke so sharply, the cat on her lap raised its head, startled out of its nap.

"Have you actually spoken to her?" Mrs. O'Neill asked.

"Not exactly." Miss Perkins stroked the cat on her lap. "I got my ways of finding out things on the sly. Things folks don't want me to know. Things I don't want them to know I'm interested in."

Mrs. O'Neill nodded as if she understood, but like me, I was sure she didn't quite see what the old woman meant. But she was a witch, and we weren't, so why should we expect to understand?

Miss Perkins stretched a hand toward Selene. "Bring me that dolly, dear."

Selene gripped the doll. "What do you want with her? She's mine."

The old woman leaned toward Selene and stared into her eyes. "The dolly," she said. "Give me the dolly."

The air seemed charged with electricity, and my skin tingled as if a thunderstorm were rolling through the house. I wanted to jump up and run from the dark room and the craziness of the old woman, but something kept me where I was.

Selene rose slowly and gave the doll to Miss Perkins. "Good girl," she said as Selene backed away and collapsed on the sofa. Mrs. O'Neill put her arm around her. For once, Selene did not pull away.

In the meantime, Miss Perkins turned the doll this way and that, studying her intently in the dim light of the fire. She caressed Little Erica, moved her arms and legs, and hummed to herself, as if she'd forgotten we were in the room. After a minute or so, she bent her head over the cat in her lap and seemed to listen. He made a strange sound, not a meow, not a growl, not a purr, but something like all three. She nodded her head slowly.

At last Miss Perkins looked up. Her eyes seemed unfocused, as if she weren't seeing us or the room, but was looking at something far away. Selene and I moved closer to Mrs. O'Neill. She held us both tightly.

Miss Perkins slowly came back to the room and the fire and the three of us. Her sharp eyes fixed themselves on me. "Come here, boy. Come close."

Even though I wanted to stay where I was, safe and warm beside Mrs. O'Neill, I did as she said. The old woman smelled of dried grass and herbs and flowers. A nice smell. I sniffed and breathed it in, feeling it spread through me like magic.

“How much do you want your sister back, boy?” she whispered. Her eyes probed mine.

“I’d do anything to get her away from Auntie.”

“Will you go to Auntie’s cabin tonight, all by yourself? No mammy, no pappy, nobody. All by yourself. Just you. Are you brave enough?”

I stared at her, almost speechless. “Tonight?”

“You said you want your sister back. You said you’ll do anything. This is the onliest way to do it.”

I glanced at Mrs. O’Neill to see what she thought. Her eyes were open but unfocused, as blank as Little Erica’s eyes. She and Selene seemed to be in a trance.

Miss Perkins leaned toward me and studied my face. “You brave enough? ’Cause if you ain’t, you’ll never see your sister till fifty years from now. And that one there will be soon be dead.” She nodded at Selene. “It’s for both these girls you’re doing it. You break the spell for your sister, you break it for Selene, too. Once the spell’s broke, Auntie will be finished. The dark will take her.”

I tried to stand tall and straight. Maybe if I acted brave, I’d be brave. “What do I have to do?” My voice came out in a squeak.

“You go to the door of the cabin at midnight—not one minute earlier, not one minute later. Knock three times. Auntie will call out, ‘Who’s that knock, knock, knocking at my door?’ You’ll say, ‘A poor traveler lost in the cold.’ She’ll say, ‘What you want with me?’ You’ll say, ‘To sit by your fire a spell.’”

Miss Perkins stroked the cat’s black fur and crooned to him. Except for the wind and the fire, the room was as still as death.

“She’ll ask you to tell her a riddle,” she went on. “First you say, ‘I brung you a cherry without a stone.’” Miss Perkins reached into her pocket and drew out a blossom. She laid it carefully on the table beside her. “A cherry don’t have a stone when it’s blooming.”

“Second, say, ‘I brung you a chicken without a bone.’” Miss Perkins took an egg from her pocket and laid it beside the blossom. “A chicken don’t have bones while it’s in the egg.”

“They’re old riddles,” she said. “Everyone knows the answers, so she’ll ask for something harder, a riddle she’s never heard before.”

The old woman coughed and sniffed and fidgeted with the doll. “Last of all, say, ‘I brung you a servant that never tires and never grows old.’” She

added Little Erica to the objects on the table.

"It ain't a riddle she'll have heard before. If she can't guess the answer in three tries, she's got to open the door and let you in."

My heart knocked about in my chest, hammering and pounding my ribs. "But when she sees me, she'll know who I am."

"Auntie ain't the onliest one that knows her way around the dark side of the moon. I got tricks of my own, boy. She won't know you. I'll see to that."

The cat interrupted her with an odd, questioning sort of noise. Miss Perkins stroked him till he purred loud enough to make my bones vibrate.

"Soon as you're through the door," she went on, "Auntie will ask you for the answer to the riddle. Open the sack and show her the servant that never tires and never grows old. Once she sees that dolly, she'll forget about your sister. At least for a while—"

"But—" I couldn't stop myself from interrupting the old woman again. "She *knows* the doll belongs to Erica. And how can a doll be a servant? She's plastic, she's not alive, she can't move or talk or—"

"Hush up and quit asking fool questions. You got to trust me, boy. Get your sister out of the cabin as fast as you can. She won't want to come. You'll have to drag her away. Run for home like you got wings on your heels or seven-league boots on your feet."

"But what if—"

"Don't vex me no more, boy. Do what I tell you, bring your sister home, and the spell will bust at sunrise—for both girls. They'll remember who they are in this world, but they won't remember nothing about Auntie's world." Miss Perkins scrunched her face into a tight fist, and the cat lashed his tail and hissed at me.

My brain whirled with questions, but my voice had dried up and my mouth felt numb, the way it does in the dentist's office when he gives you Novocain. I nodded, as if I understood, and hoped I'd be able to do all she asked.

Miss Perkins put my sister's doll into a burlap sack, tied it shut, and gave it to me. "No matter what, don't open this sack until you're inside the cabin, and don't be scairt of the dolly."

Before I could ask her why I'd be scared of a doll, she gave me a warning look, and I shut my mouth.

Miss Perkins nodded, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. “Now go sit on that sofa and keep your mouth shut about everything I done told you.”

I took my place next to Mrs. O’Neill, who continued to stare straight ahead at nothing I could see.

Miss Perkins murmured a few words to the cat. The moment he closed his eyes, Mrs. O’Neill and Selene came back from wherever they’d been. They stretched and yawned as if they’d been napping. Selene looked bewildered, as if she wasn’t quite sure where she was. Although I expected her to ask about the doll, she didn’t say a word.

“Thank you for your time,” Mrs. O’Neill said to Miss Perkins. “I’m sorry you can’t do anything to help us. That poor child—fifty years is a long time.”

“The years will go by in a flash.” Miss Perkins picked up a ball of yarn and her knitting—a lumpy black scarf already long enough to wrap two or three times around her neck.

Gently helping Selene to her feet, Mrs. O’Neill turned to me. “Come along, Daniel. The snow’s getting worse. Your parents must be worried.”

“See yourselves out,” Miss Perkins said. “I’m a mite weary tonight. When you’re old as me, the cold settles in your bones and sets them to aching and scraping against each other.”

“Good night, then,” Mrs. O’Neill said. “Take care of yourself, Miss Perkins.”

“You, too, dearie, and don’t fret yourself about the snow. It’ll stop soon enough.”

We left Miss Perkins sitting by the fire, knitting and humming to herself while the cat dozed on her lap. Outside, the cold air froze the hairs in my nose, and my eyes watered, but I was glad to be away from the smoky smell of the house.

I kept the sack behind my back, but no one noticed it. Selene sat behind me with her nose pressed against the window and watched the empty streets of Woodville glide past. A flake or two of snow drifted past the windshield, but Miss Perkins was right—the moon was already breaking through the clouds.

As usual, our house looked dark and vacant. As it had the previous night, a lamp glimmered in Mom’s bedroom window, but the downstairs windows were lit only by the headlights of the car.

Mrs. O'Neill stared at the house. "My goodness, Daniel, is anyone home?"

"They're upstairs," I said. "The light's on in the bedroom. Dad's office is in the back—that's where he is." Where he always is—lost in computer games and websites for missing children.

As I opened the car door, she asked, "Do you want me to come in with you?"

"No, it's okay. Everything's fine." What a good liar I was getting to be. "Thanks for taking me to see Miss Perkins again."

While we talked, I was aware of Selene watching me through the window. I waved to her, but she turned away.

Mrs. O'Neill said goodbye and turned around slowly, her headlights washing over the unpainted sides of our house. I watched the taillights grow small as the car disappeared around the curve in the driveway.

The kitchen looked the way it always did. Sink full of dirty dishes. Trash can overflowing with pizza boxes, beer cans, and wine bottles. Table littered with newspapers, paper plates, coffee cups, forks and knives and spoons, an empty wine bottle, ashtrays heaped with cigarette butts.

"Dad? Mom?" I called.

"Up here," Dad answered.

I climbed the back stairs slowly, keeping the sack behind my back. It was the new normal—Dad playing a war game on the computer, Mom huddled in her room under a quilt, reading.

"We saved some pizza for you," Mom said. "It's in the fridge. Just heat it up in the microwave."

"Thanks." I stowed the sack under my bed and went down to the kitchen to warm up the pizza. The crust tasted like burned cardboard and the cheese had turned to something that resembled melted plastic and stuck to my teeth, but I ate it anyway. I was going to be out in the cold a long time. I needed something in my belly.

For a while I sat at the table and watched the clock. Seven p.m., eight p.m.—time crept past. Upstairs, my parents were silently engrossed in their books and games.

I said good night to them and went to my room. They barely acknowledged my presence. It was as if I'd disappeared too. If I failed tonight, if Bloody Bones killed and ate me, would they care? Would they send anyone to look for me? Or would they just sink deeper and deeper into

the house, burrowing under blankets, eating bad pizza, drinking, smoking, not even noticing I was gone?

For at least an hour I stood at my window, trying to remember the way our family used to be, but only seeing myself teasing Erica and making her cry, forcing her to leave the doll in the woods. Why had I been so mean to her?

I shivered in the cold air that leaked through the loose windowpanes and watched the wind blow the clouds away. The moon sailed into sight and shone on the snowy fields. In its bright light I saw the beginning of the path that led to Auntie's cabin.

I glanced at my clock. Ten thirty. It was time to go.

EIGHTEEN

I hauled the burlap sack out from under the bed, grabbed a flashlight, and tiptoed downstairs. Even though I'd heard Dad go to bed and I knew Mom was with him, the house felt empty, so dark and cold and silent I could hear my own breathing. I pulled one of Erica's old jackets off the coatrack, grabbed a pair of mittens, a hat, and her red boots, and stuffed everything into a backpack. Zipping my parka, I stepped into the darkness. The cold wind hit me like a fist, and the freezing air hurt my chest.

Crouched in the snow, I took a long look at the house. Then with my head down, I ran across the field and into the woods. No one but deer and small animals had walked on the path since it snowed, so I slipped and slid and sank to my knees over and over again, clambering out of one snowdrift and stumbling into another.

The burlap sack made everything worse. With every step I took, it grew heavier. I didn't understand how the doll could weigh so much. Maybe plowing through the snow was taking all my energy, leaving me tired and weak legged.

I was about to open the sack to make sure something else wasn't in there —a few boulders maybe—but I remembered what Miss Perkins had told me. If I wanted to rescue Erica, I had to do exactly what the old woman said.

By the time I reached the trail to the top of Brewster's Hill, I was exhausted. There was no protection from the wind. Snow blew in my face. Hard, icy pellets stung my skin and made my forehead ache. Every now and then I glimpsed shadowy shapes in the darkness—deer, I hoped.

There were noises, too—owls, foxes, and the low mutters of other things, growling and snarling, squealing and yelping in the woods. Brody told me there were wild hogs up here, razorbacks like Bloody Bones. I told myself it wasn't the monster hog I heard out there, but my knees shook with fear.

The sack grew so heavy I could barely drag it uphill. Gasping for breath, I thought it was like a backpack that never weighed much when I left home, but grew heavier after an hour or so of hiking. I felt like Atlas carrying the world on my shoulders.

Again I was tempted to open the sack and take out whatever was weighing it down, but when I started fumbling with the rope that held it closed, I swear I heard Miss Perkins's voice in the wind telling me not to do it. I sighed and began climbing again, dragging the sack behind me.

When I finally reached the top of the hill, it was almost midnight. Stunned, I stared at the scene before me. No longer in ruins, the cabin looked like something in a fairy tale. Snow covered its roof, icicles hung from its eves, smoke rose from its chimney, and candles glowed in its windows.

I crept closer, scared that Old Auntie would hear my footsteps. After hiding my backpack behind a rock near the cabin, I laid the sack down by the cabin door, glad to be relieved of its weight. Shadows cast by the windblown trees made the sack seem to be moving. Uneasily, I edged away from it. It wasn't a trick of the shadows. The sack had begun to move, as if something inside wanted to get out.

I heard Old Auntie walking around inside the cabin, berating someone in a harsh voice. "Lazy girl, stupid girl," she said. "You ain't worth a wooden nickel. The girl afore you done all I asked and more, but you act like you never scrubbed a pot in your life."

I heard a smack and a low cry. "Don't hit me, Auntie. I'm doing my best." *Erica*, I thought, *Erica's in there.* Yet I stood at the door like a statue, afraid to raise my hand and knock.

"Well, your best ain't good enough, is it?" Another slap. Another cry from my sister.

The moon cast my shadow on the door, making me seem much larger than I was. I forced myself to knock three times.

From inside, a shrill voice called, "Who's that knock, knock, knocking at my door?"

"A poor traveler lost in the cold." Fear made it hard to keep my voice steady.

"What do you want with me?"

"To sit by your fire a spell."

"Ask me a riddle, and maybe I'll let you in."

I took a deep breath. Hoping I remembered the words, I said, "I brung you a cherry without a stone."

"A cherry when it's blooming, it has no stone," Old Auntie answered. "Ask me another that ain't so easy."

“I brung you a chicken that has no bone.”

“Hah, another easy one—a chicken when it’s pipping, it has no bone.” Old Auntie laughed. “Now you tell me one I ain’t heard, laddie, and make it snappy.”

“I brung you a servant that never tires and never grows old.” At my feet, the sack lurched wildly, and a harsh voice cried, “Let me out!”

I backed away in horror, but inside the cabin, all was silence. Auntie must have been mulling over the riddle. “A servant that never tires and never grows old?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The sack heaved. “Let me out!”

“Is the answer time?” Auntie called.

“No, ma’am.”

Another silence. “You sure it’s not time?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“That’s right. Time ain’t nobody’s servant,” she muttered. “T’other way round, I reckon.” Another moment of silence. “How about water? Is that the answer?”

“No, ma’am.”

Again the sack twitched with life. Again the voice cried, “Let me out!”

“Is it fire, then?” Auntie asked through the door.

“No, none of them is right, ma’am.” That was three wrong guesses. She had to let me in.

Sure enough, a key jiggled in a lock and the door slowly opened. The old woman who’d terrified me in the woods poked her head out.

Spotting the sack, she asked, “What’s in that there gunnysack?”

“The answer to the riddle,” I told her. “Let me in and you’ll see.”

She stepped back, and I dragged the sack inside. It was all I could do to manage it. It humped up and swayed from side to side. Something in that sack was definitely alive.

Behind Old Auntie, my sister crouched by the fire. Although I’d told myself that Erica might not look like herself, I had no idea she’d be almost unrecognizable. Thin and pale, dirty and barefoot, her hair an uncombed thicket of tangles, she wore a colorless, shapeless dress that hung loosely from her bony frame. More than anyone else, she looked like Selene—the same sullen expression on her face, the same fear, the same exhaustion. She could have been Selene’s twin.

It was clear that she didn't know me, and judging by the look in her eyes, she didn't trust me either. How was I to get her out of the cabin and drag her all the way home?

Auntie must have noticed me staring at Erica, because she said, "Don't pay her no mind. She ain't nobody. Just Girl. The worst servant I ever had. Don't know the meaning of work."

Hiding her face, Erica fed twigs into the fire. "I'm sorry, Auntie," she whispered. "I do my best."

"I told you your best ain't nearly good enough, Girl." Old Auntie started struggling with the rope that tied the sack closed. "There's something alive in here," she cried. "It wants out. Get away, laddie. Let's see what you brung me."

She shoved me aside. At the moment I was more scared of the doll than I was of Old Auntie.

"It's my servant, ain't it? The answer to that there riddle about never getting tired and never getting old."

She tore the sack open, and the doll jumped out. It was the size of Erica herself, but it looked nothing like Little Erica. Its hair was tangled and fell over its bony face like a thicket of brambles. Its arms were long and skinny, its sharp nails like claws. It wore tatters of clothing, stained and faded. The fabric was so thin I saw its ribs.

With a grin as wicked as death, the conjure woman laughed with delight and picked up the doll. "Why, ain't you the ugliest little critter I ever did see!"

"Let me down, Auntie, let me down!" As soon as its feet hit the floor, it grabbed a broom and began sweeping, running this way and that like a wind-up toy, lurching and bumping into things, knocking furniture over, breaking bowls, scattering Auntie's things like leaves in a winter storm.

"Auntie, Auntie," it cried, "catch me if you can!"

While Auntie chased it around the cabin, I grabbed Erica and hauled her toward the door. Just as I expected, she fought the way Selene had, kicking, scratching, biting. It was like holding a wild animal.

"Auntie!" she screamed. "Auntie!"

But the old woman was too busy to notice what was happening. Or maybe she didn't care about my sister now that she had a new servant. She caught the creature and slapped its face hard.

“Bad girl,” she screamed, and shook it until its bones rattled and its head bobbed. “Look what you done!”

Once Erica and I were outside, I held her still, forced her arms into the jacket’s sleeves, and zipped up the front. I jammed the hat on her head, but she kicked so hard I couldn’t get the boots on her feet. Abandoning them, I snatched up my backpack and dragged my sister toward the trail.

“Auntie, Auntie!” she shrieked.

“What’s wrong with you?” I shook her. “We’ve got to get away from here.”

“Leave me be. I don’t want to go anywhere!”

“I’m your brother. I’ve come to take you home.”

“Liar! You ain’t my brother. I don’t have no brother. I got no one save for Auntie—no home but here!” Erica thrashed and flailed and kicked. “Let me go! Let me go!”

I held her tight and kept going, stumbling through the snow. Behind us, I heard a sort of grunting, squealing, growling sound. I looked back and saw Bloody Bones come out of the trees. The moon shone on his bald head and cast his shadow across the snow. His ragged clothes fluttered in the wind. I saw his bones and his claws and his sharp teeth.

Even though Erica slowed me down, I ran and jumped over the snow, going as fast as I could. Bloody Bones wasn’t going to stop me from bringing my sister home and making things right again.

Behind us, the cabin door opened, and Old Auntie screamed, “Get them, dear boy, bring them back to me!”

“No, Auntie,” Erica cried. “Don’t sic him on me! I’ll work hard, I’ll do things right, I promise!”

Still struggling to keep hold of my sister, I slipped and slid down the trail, trying to keep us from falling. The wind blew us toward the edge of the drop-off, roots and stones rose up to trip us, but I kept going, forcing Erica to keep up with me.

Bloody Bones crashed through the snow behind us, gaining on us with every step. I imagined his breath as foul as death itself, his sharp claws squeezing around my throat, his eyeless skull looming over me in the moonlight.

“Don’t let them get away!” Old Auntie’s voice mingled with the wind shrieking through the trees. “Stop them—they’ll bring us both to ruin.”

Bloody Bones snuffled and snorted. His bones rattled. He was gaining on us. I felt him grab at my jacket and miss. I tried to run faster, but a stone turned under my foot, and I fell. I lost my grip on Erica and lay stunned.

Above me stood Bloody Bones. While I lay in the snow staring up at him, he threw back his head and snorted. Then he bent down and pulled me to my feet. His bear claws sank into my shoulders. His face was so close I could see his tusks and his panther fangs and his empty eye sockets. The stink of him made me gag.

His bones rattled as he lifted me above his head. He was going to throw me off the cliff.

Just as he tensed to hurl me into the valley, I heard the crack of something hard hit Bloody Bones. He staggered backward, away from the edge of the cliff, and lost his hold on me. One leg collapsed, and he fell with a clatter of bones.

As he struggled to stand, another rock hit him. This one broke his arm clean off. The shattered bones dropped into the snow. Howling with anger, Bloody Bones lunged toward me, his one arm outstretched to push me to my death, his right leg useless.

Without thinking of anything but surviving, I dodged away from him. Unable to stop in time, Bloody Bones plunged over the edge of the cliff, screaming as he bounced from rock to rock, his bones flying apart and scattering as he went. In seconds, he was gone, leaving only the echo of his scream.

Auntie hobbled down the trail toward us. “My boy, my dear boy!” she screamed, her face and voice filled with rage and sorrow. “What have you done, you miserable, wicked creature?”

I backed away, but it wasn’t me the conjure woman was speaking to. Erica stood behind me. Pale and trembling, she held a rock in each hand.

Old Auntie flung a string of strange words at both of us, but the wind turned them back on her. Raising her hands as if to fend off what she’d said, she began backing slowly up the trail.

“What will I do now without my dear boy?” she cried.

With each step she took, the wind blew harder and her shadow grew fainter, her body less solid. By the time she vanished into the woods, she was almost transparent.

“Auntie.” Erica stretched her arms toward the old woman. “Auntie. I’m sorry. Don’t leave me. I only meant to stop him from hurting the boy.”

Seizing my sister's arm, I yanked her down the trail. She was still struggling when she looked back and screamed, "The cabin's on fire. It's burning! Put it out! Save her!"

I spun around. At the top of Brewster's Hill, flames leaped into the air, lighting the bare trees with an orange glow, sending sparks shooting toward the winter sky.

With a burst of strength, Erica broke away from me and ran up the trail. I ran after her, but this time she was too fast for me. I caught up with her at the cabin.

Or what was left of it. The old rotten wood had exploded in flames and burned so fast that the fire was already flickering over charred logs. Smoke blew sideways in the wind. Embers scattered. I kept a firm grip on Erica to keep her from running into the ruins to rescue Auntie.

"She's gone," I said. Dead and gone, I hoped. Burned to ashes. "You can't do anything for her now."

Erica collapsed against me, sobbing. "Now I got nobody. No home. Nothing."

The fight had gone out of her. I held her tight and wondered if I'd ever hugged her before. I couldn't remember, but I kind of doubted it. Right now, though, I wanted to hold her for a long time, never let her go, never let anything bad ever happen to her again.

"You have me," I told her, "and Mom and Dad."

She shook her head and snuffled. "I ain't got nobody," she insisted. "No brother, no sister, no mother, no father."

In tears, she pulled away from me and stumbled down the trail. She had nothing more to say, and neither did I.

As we came out of the woods, I pointed to our house, a dark box in the field, moonlight glinting off the glass in its windows

"That's where we live," I told her. "You and me and Mom and Dad."

"I never saw that house. I never lived there." Her voice was as dull and lifeless as Selene's, but she let me lead her into the kitchen.

"Mom, Dad!" I shouted. "Come down here."

Upstairs, a bed creaked, footsteps crossed the floor, a door opened. "Daniel," Dad called, "what are you shouting about? It's three a.m."

"Come see!" In a few seconds I'd be a hero, the boy who rescued his sister from the old conjure woman. They'd be so happy, so proud of me. I could hardly wait for them to see Erica.

Dad fumbled with the hall light and came slowly downstairs, barely awake, from the sound of it. He stopped halfway and stared at Erica. "What's that girl doing here? I thought she was staying with the O'Neills. Your mother won't—"

I stared at him, shocked. "Dad, it's Erica. I found her!"

"Are you crazy?" Dad asked. "Have you completely lost your mind?"

Mom appeared behind him. "Why did you bring that creature here? I won't have her in this house!"

Erica scowled at me. "Didn't I tell you? I'm not your sister. They don't want me. They don't love me. It's just like Auntie said."

She pulled away from me and ran toward the back door, but I grabbed her before she opened it. Holding her tight, I made her face Mom and Dad.

"Please look at her," I told them. "She's been living with a crazy old woman up on Brewster's Hill, and she doesn't remember anything about us —just like Selene. But she's Erica."

"She can't be," Mom whispered. Dad shook his head. With his back to Erica and me, he stared out the kitchen window at the black night.

How could they not recognize their own daughter? Yes, she was dirty, her hair uncombed. She was thin and pale, obviously in the same state as Selene, but under it all, she was my sister and their daughter, the one they'd been mourning for almost a week.

Erica began to cry. "Let me go," she begged. "I don't belong here, I don't belong anywhere, I might as well be dead."

"Please don't talk like that." Slowly Mom reached out and touched Erica's shoulder. "I don't know who you are, but I can't bear to see a child so unhappy."

Erica collapsed against Mom's side. Her bare feet were blue with cold. Her face was bruised, and she was shaking hard enough to make her teeth chatter. "I'm so tired," she whispered. "Please can I sleep by your fire till morning? I promise I won't be no bother. If you got work for me to do, I'll do it. I'll sweep. I'll scrub floors. I'll chop wood."

"You'll do no such thing," Mom said. "You're in no condition to work for us or anyone else."

"And you certainly won't sleep by the fire," Dad said.

"Auntie says my place is on the hearth," Erica said, "by the fire. It's warm there, and I don't mind the hard floor no more."

“You poor child. I don’t know who your aunt is, but she’s not fit to take care of you.” Dad bent down and picked Erica up. She lay as limp as a kitten in his arms, her eyes half closed. “She hardly weighs anything,” he said.

I watched him carry her upstairs to her room. She was asleep before Mom covered her with her lavender checked comforter. Mom and Dad stood together, looking down at her, their eyes full of questions.

NINETEEN

At dawn, Erica's cries woke me with a jolt that nearly knocked me out of bed. "Mommy!" she screamed. "Mommy!"

I ran into the hall and followed Mom and Dad into Erica's bedroom. My sister flung herself at Mom, crying hysterically. Over her head, Mom stared at Dad, her eyes wide with shock. Both looked as if they were sleepwalking—groggy, unsteady, trembling.

"Erica, oh, Erica," Mom cried. "It's you. It really is you. Oh, darling, you've come home at last."

"We thought we'd lost you," Dad whispered. "And then, when Daniel brought you home, we, we"—his voice broke for a second—"we didn't even recognize you."

I don't think Erica heard a word my parents said. She was still caught in the snares of her dream. "Hold me tight, Mommy. Don't let Auntie come for me. Keep her away."

Mom rocked Erica as if she were a baby, murmured to her, held her tight. "We won't let anyone take you away."

Gradually Erica stopped crying, but she shivered and shook and looked around fearfully, as if she expected to see Auntie's face at the window.

"You're safe now," Dad said. "Don't be afraid. It was just a dream."

It was then that Erica noticed her hands. "Why are my hands so dirty?" Pulling away from Mom, she stared at her reflection in the mirror over her bureau. A wild-eyed girl with tangled hair and a dirty, bruised face stared back at her. "What's happened to me?"

Mom looked at Dad as if she wasn't sure what to say.

"You've been missing for almost a week," Dad finally said.

"Daniel found you on Brewster's Hill last night," Mom added, "and brought you home."

"What were you doing up there in the cold?" Dad asked. "We've searched every square inch of the woods, the creeks, the lakes, and no one found a trace of you. And now you're here. It's a miracle."

Erica looked puzzled. "I was looking for my doll with Daniel. We couldn't find her—someone took her."

Pausing to catch her breath, Erica spread her fingers and studied her broken nails and the dirt ground into her skin. With a shudder, she flung herself back into Mom's arms. "And then someone took *me*."

Mom held Erica, hugging her and stroking her hair. "No, no," she murmured. "You were lost, but now you're home. We'll never let anyone take you from us."

We sat with Erica for a long time, soothing her, calming her. At last, just as morning light filled the room, she relaxed and fell asleep.

Mom told Dad and me to go to bed. "I'll stay and watch over her," she whispered. "I don't want her to wake up frightened again."

Even though it was morning, I did what Mom said. I was warm and safe. I'd brought my sister home, and she was sleeping in her own bed. As soon as I pulled up the covers, I dropped into sleep like a stone falling into a well.

When I came downstairs, Dad was in the kitchen. While I'd been sleeping, he'd shaved, showered, and exchanged his sweatpants for jeans and his sweatshirt for a wool sweater. He'd washed the dishes and taken out the trash. He'd swept the floor and scrubbed the countertops. The smell of freshly made coffee filled the air.

"You must not have gone back to bed," I said.

"I couldn't sleep, so I cleaned up the place." He poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down at the table. "I apologize for not believing you, Daniel," he said, "but you have to admit your story sounded like something out of a fairy tale—old conjure women roaming the mountains, stealing children, keeping them for fifty years. I'm a practical man, a rational man. I've never believed in the supernatural."

He frowned and rubbed his chin. Except for the uncertainty in his eyes, he looked like himself. "I'd never have believed in Old Auntie when we lived in Connecticut, but here, well, crazy as it sounds, I can't come up with any other explanation."

I looked at him, surprised. "You *believe* me?"

"Like I said, what other explanation is there? Erica couldn't have survived on her own in this cold. There's no evidence that she was kidnapped by a passing stranger. Her dream fits in with what you've told me about that conjure woman or witch—or whatever she is or was."

He drank more coffee and stared past me at nothing in particular. “And then there’s Selene,” he added. “Surely the O’Neills are too sane to believe in old stories unless there’s some truth to them.”

Before I could say a word, someone began pounding on the back door. “Mama,” a voice cried. “Daddy, it’s me. Let me in, let me in!”

Dad was so startled, he almost spilled what was left of his coffee, but I jumped up and flung the door open. Selene stood on the porch, staring at me.

“Who are you?” she asked. “What are you doing in my house? Where’s my mother? Who’s that man at the table?”

“Don’t you remember me?”

“I’ve never seen you in my life.” Pushing me aside, she headed toward the back stairs. “Mama, Daddy, it’s me,” she called. “Where are you?”

Before Selene was halfway up the steps, Mrs. O’Neill followed her into the kitchen. “Wait,” she cried to the nearly hysterical girl. “I need to tell you something.”

Selene ignored her. “Mama!” she screamed. “Mama!”

Her eyes darted around the kitchen. “What have you done with our table? Where are our chairs? And the clock on the wall and the calendar by the door and the curtains Mama made?”

Dodging Mrs. O’Neill, she ran into the hall. We heard her go from room to room, her feet clattering across the floor. “This isn’t right. This isn’t our couch, not our chairs—where’s the wallpaper? Mama! Daddy!” Her voice rose with every word.

Mrs. O’Neill caught her at the foot of the front stairway. “Selene, Selene, I know everything seems wrong and you’re scared, but you must be still and listen to me.”

“What are you and those other people doing in my house?” Selene cried. “Why have you changed all the furniture? Where’s my mother and my father and Nadine?”

“Please, please, Selene, let me explain.”

Mrs. O’Neill managed to lead the girl into the living room. “Here,” she said gently. “Sit with me, and I’ll tell you the best I can.”

Selene sat on the edge of the couch and stared at Mrs. O’Neill. Her face pale, her eyes huge, she asked, “Has something terrible happened to them? Is that it?”

"Oh, my dear child," Mrs. O'Neill said sadly. "I hardly know where to begin."

Silently I went back to the kitchen. Dad had made another pot of coffee. Upstairs, Mom was giving Erica a bath. In the living room, Mrs. O'Neill murmured to Selene. For now, at least, the house was quiet—the way it used it to be.

We sat together silently, Dad and I. Neither of us knew what to say. He drank his coffee and stared out the window, his face expressionless.

I'd had time to adjust to the reality of witchcraft and spells and hogs that walked on their hind legs, but just a few hours earlier Old Auntie had turned my parents' beliefs about the nature of reality upside down. Maybe they should visit Miss Perkins. She could explain the way things were in Woodville.

I heard footsteps on the stairs. Scrubbed clean, her hair washed, brushed, and combed, wearing clean clothes, Erica seemed to be exactly the same as before—until you saw the bruises on her face, until you looked into her eyes and saw the shadows there. She'd been somewhere only she and Selene knew about.

Mom had washed *her* hair, too, and finally changed her clothes. Like Erica, she seemed her old self, the mother I knew, except her face had wrinkles I hadn't noticed before and there were new gray streaks in her hair.

Erica sat beside me. "You look really nice," I told her.

She put her hands over her face to hide the bruises. "I look awful."

Mom opened a catalog and showed Erica a page. "I know how much you loved your doll," she said. "We can order another one just like her."

With a look of horror, Erica shoved the catalog away so fast she knocked over the glass of orange juice Dad had set in front of her. "Get that picture away from me," she shouted. "I hate that doll. Throw the catalog away. Burn it up!"

"But Erica," Mom began.

"No!"

When Erica began to cry, Mom hugged her. "It's all right, honey. I just thought . . ." Her voice trailed away as she stroked Erica's hair.

I glanced at the catalog lying open on the floor. There she was, Little Erica, red hair and all. *Oh, Mom,* I thought, *if you only knew* . . . I picked up the catalog and carried it to the garbage can. No more Little Erica.

Once Erica calmed down, Dad asked, “Who wants pancakes for breakfast?” He seemed to be making a huge effort to act as if this were an ordinary morning.

Mrs. O’Neill appeared in the doorway. “Did we hear something about pancakes?”

Pale and quiet, Selene followed her into the kitchen. While Dad stirred the batter, Mrs. O’Neill urged Selene to join us at the table, but she shook her head and held back.

“Who’s that?” Erica asked.

“Selene,” Mom said. “She lives down the road with Mr. and Mrs. O’Neill.”

“She’s your age,” I told Erica.

Erica slid out of her chair and crossed the room. Taking Selene’s hand, she said, “Come sit beside me. We’re going to be friends, you and me. I just know it.”

Erica led Selene to the chair next to hers. “Do you like pancakes?”

Selene nodded. “With maple syrup.”

“Coming right up.” Dad set plates in front of Erica and Selene, and Mom passed them the syrup.

Before either girl picked up her fork, they studied each other for at least a minute. They didn’t say a word, but I sensed something flowing back and forth between them. Slowly Erica put her hand on Selene’s hand and smiled at her. Selene smiled back.

It was the first time I’d ever seen that girl look happy.

After breakfast, Erica took her new friend upstairs. I heard Selene say, “You sleep in my old room.” Then the door closed behind them.

I looked around the quiet kitchen, which was neat and orderly again. Sunlight filled corners that once were dark. No whispers disturbed the silence.

Mrs. O’Neill took a sip of coffee. “I believe those girls will be good friends.”

Mom smiled. “Erica needs a friend.”

“So does Selene,” Mrs. O’Neill said.

After a little silence Mrs. O’Neill added, “Thank goodness, they’ve both forgotten Auntie and all that happened to them in that cabin.”

Except in dreams, I thought. *Except in dreams.*

TWENTY

A few days later, Brody showed up. It was the first time he'd been in our house, and he spent some time looking around and making comments like "Your roof's leaking, that's why that brown stain's on your ceiling" or "You better get your dad to put some putty in them window frames. You're letting cold air in and warm air out. That'll run your heat bill sky-high."

Of course, what he'd really come for was to see Erica, who was helping Mom clean the living room—she'd been doing chores ever since she came back from Old Auntie's.

"She looks real good," he said in a low voice. "Lots better than Selene."

"Selene's fine now," I told him. "Miss Perkins was right about the spell. She said it would break when the sun came up, and it did. Just like that—Erica knew who she was, and so did Selene."

"Must've been mighty bad news for that poor girl—her parents being dead and all. Ain't no fun losing your mom, I can tell you that, brother."

"She's going to be all right. The O'Neills treat her like a granddaughter."

While we had a glass of milk and some cookies, I told Brody what he wanted to hear—all the details of Erica's rescue.

When I was done, Brody said, "I been telling the kids at school about you going to the cabin and seeing Old Auntie and her hog. Boy, was they surprised you done that. Didn't think you had the guts."

Brody helped himself to more cookies and grinned at me. "When I tell them what you done to get your sister back, they'll all want to be your friend."

I took a handful of cookies and grinned back at him. "You want to climb Brewster's Hill and take a look at what's left of the cabin?"

Brody swallowed a mouthful of cookies and thought about it. "You sure Old Auntie's really gone, both her and that hog?"

"I told you, Bloody Bones fell off the cliff and broke into bits, and Old Auntie died in the fire."

Brody dipped his last cookie into his milk and shrugged. "You mind if I whistle for Bella? She's good company."

So with Bella leading the way, Brody and I climbed the trail to the top of Brewster's Hill. The dog acted as if there was nothing to fear in the hollow. In fact, she ran over and peed on the charred wood just as if she were saying it was her place now.

While Bella sniffed in the ruins, Brody and I kicked at the logs and poked around in the ashes as if we were looking for something. I don't know what. Just something.

Brody wandered over to the chimney, which was still standing. "Daniel!" he yelled. "Come here!" He was backing away from whatever it was, plainly scared. I ran to see what he'd found. Little Erica lay in the ashes, looking up at me with one eye, almost as if she were winking. The other eye had melted into its socket. Her hair was singed, and her face was black and wrinkled from the fire, but it was Little Erica all right.

Looking at the doll made me feel as if I were about to throw up the cookies I'd stuffed myself with before we'd left the house.

"It's my sister's doll," I told him.

"The one that started all the trouble?" He looked puzzled. "But she's little, like a plain old ordinary kid's doll. You told me she growed big and come to life."

"When the spell broke, I guess she changed back to what she really was —a lump of plastic, mostly melted now."

"You ain't going to give her back to your sister, are you?"

"Erica doesn't want anything to do with dolls anymore."

I couldn't take my eyes away from Little Erica. She had a wicked look, like some kind of shrunken mummy—maybe because of the fire, maybe because of something else.

Bella ambled over to see what we were looking at. As soon as she saw the doll, she whined and backed away. She was shivering the way she had the night we'd visited the cabin and seen Old Auntie and Bloody Bones.

"You think it's okay to leave her here?" Brody asked. He was worried about the doll, too. I could tell by his voice.

I shook my head. Little Erica didn't seem like a lump of plastic anymore, and I didn't want someone to find her. What if a bit of Old Auntie was in that doll?

"Let's bury her," Brody said.

Using boards from the cabin, the two of us dug a hole by the fireplace, making it as deep as we could. The ground there was soft despite the cold,

probably because of the fire.

Neither of us wanted to touch the doll, so we scooped her out of the ashes with one of the boards we used to dig with. We dumped dirt on her, stamping it down with our feet so it was as hard as we could make it. Then we pulled and tugged and pushed stones from the old wall and piled them on top of the grave.

"There," Brody said. "She won't never get out now."

Wiping our hands on our jeans, we whistled for Bella and hiked down the trail toward home.

Summer, Two Years Later

An old woman stands on the hilltop, just on the edge of the green woods, smiling down on the farmhouse below. What she sees pleases her. The house has a new roof and a fresh coat of pale blue paint. The junk in the yard is gone. The barn has been cleaned out and repaired. The woman who lives in the house uses it for a workroom. She's in there now, weaving a rug on a loom. The old woman hears the music she plays—folk songs, ballads, with fiddles and dulcimers, tunes she's known all her life.

A man mows the grass in the front yard. He's riding one of those little tractor things they use now. Flowers bloom along a picket fence—daisies, black-eyed Susans, coneflowers, bright colors, bees swarming. A vegetable garden behind the house grows strong and healthy, just as it ought to. They'll have tomatoes, squash, beans, lettuce, spinach, even some corn. More than they can eat, but they've built a stand at the end of the driveway where they sell the extra.

The old woman watches Daniel play catch with Brody, the boy who lives down the road. She watches Erica and Selene take turns swinging on a tire hung from a high branch. She hears them laugh, all four of them.

She sees the woman come out of the barn and cross the yard, shooing chickens out of her way. A few minutes later she calls the children to come into the house and cool off with lemonade.

"Well, Auntie," the old woman says to someone she can't see, someone who once roamed these woods and watched the farmhouse with dark intent. "You been took yourself, and I aim to make sure you stay took. These children don't recollect a thing about you, except sometimes when they dream. But we all got nightmares, don't we? Then morning comes and sweeps them away like cobwebs."

Walking slowly and carefully, the old woman climbs the trail to the top of Brewster's Hill. Vines and weeds have grown over the charred wood. Wildflowers sway in the breeze. A mockingbird sings in a nearby tree.

With her walking staff, the old woman pokes at the ashes, as if she's making sure the fire's out and Auntie and Bloody Bones are still took. She pays close attention to the stones piled up near what's left of the chimney. A

tall clump of Queen Anne's lace almost hides the burial place. All is as it should be. Calm. Peaceful.

The old woman sits down on the stone wall to rest. She watches a butterfly flit among the flowers. Bees hum in the wild clover.

One of her cats has followed her, solid black except for a little white spot on its chest.

"Cat, come set a spell." She pats her lap, and the cat curls up on the old woman's bony knees.

"You and me and that boy, we done good work that snowy night." She strokes the cat until its whole body vibrates with a rumbly purr. "We made us our own tale, didn't we—a tale like the tellers told back and back and back to the first tellers sitting around their fires, keeping the dark away with their words."

The old woman yawns. Before she stands up, the cat jumps off her lap and the two of them disappear into the green woods.

MARY DOWNING HAHN

THE OLD WILLIS PLACE

a ghost story

CLARION BOOKS
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT
Boston New York

For Ann, Tom, and Jocelyn Ingham—
who know the old Willis place far
better than I ever will

Chapter 1

"They're coming, they're coming!" My brother, Georgie, ran up the shady driveway, almost too excited to speak. "Hide, Diana! Hide!"

I didn't need to ask who was coming. Scooping up my cat, Nero, I plunged into the tangle of vines and weeds lining the drive. Georgie was right behind me. Together we squatted down and watched a pickup slowly approach, bumping over the ruts. The sun and leaves patterned the windshield, hiding the people inside. Their belongings were piled haphazardly in the truck bed, held in place with ropes. Wedged among mattresses, bed frames, chests, tables, and stacks of cardboard boxes, a big golden dog panted and lurched around, excited by the smells of the woods.

"The new caretaker," I whispered. "Who's in the truck with him?"

Beside me, Nero tensed his long black body and twitched his tail, his green eyes wide with curiosity.

Georgie was still breathing hard from running to warn me. "A girl about your age. I couldn't see her very well, but the man got out of the truck to unlock the gate. He was tall and skinny and he was wearing baggy shorts. His legs were long and white." Georgie almost choked with laughter. "And he had big knobby knees."

I giggled. "He sounds like the heron we see at the pond."

"Yes, that's exactly what he looked like—long neck, pointed nose, and his hair stuck up in a crest." Georgie bumped against me, his shoulders shaking with laughter. "Heron Man, that's what we'll call him."

"Shh, shh," I hushed him. "The dog's looking this way."

The dog barked, but no one in the truck noticed. I imagined he barked often. Dogs are foolish. They bark so much at nothing that people don't pay attention, even when they should.

The truck passed us. I glimpsed the driver's birdy profile and suppressed a giggle. Soundlessly we followed the truck, keeping the trees and brambles between us and the lane. We knew where it was going.

The truck slowed almost to a stop as it approached the house. The old Willis place everyone called it, though its true name was Oak Hill Manor.

The front lawn was a field of knee-high weeds and thistles the size of small trees. Paint peeled from the front door and wood trim. The steps and porch had rotted long ago. Shutters hung crooked from the boarded windows; some had fallen off and leaned against the house. Slates from the roof littered the yard. Two tall double chimneys tilted to the right, giving the place an unstable look, as if it might topple over at any moment in a tumble of bricks.

I wondered how much the new caretaker had been told about the old Willis place. Georgie and I had been watching the house long enough to learn quite a bit. For instance, we knew the owner, Miss Lilian Willis, had been dead for about ten years. It was common knowledge she hadn't left a will, so the county owned the property now. Workmen had patched up the house in a temporary way, covering the windows with plywood and draping the leaky roof with sheets of heavy blue plastic. They'd put chains and padlocks on the doors and posted "No Hunting, No Trespassing" signs at the gate.

They'd also hired a caretaker to live in a trailer parked near the house. He hadn't done much work or stayed long. Neither had the others the county hired, one after another, too many now to remember all their names. Maybe night noises scared them—the barking of foxes, the shrill screech of owls, the rustle of unseen deer in the woods. Maybe they didn't care for the solitude. Maybe they believed in ghosts. Or came to believe in them. At any rate, after a few months, one would leave and a week or so later another would come. Where the county found them I can't imagine. They were a sorry lot. Old and grumpy. Lazy, too.

Now we had a new caretaker to spy on. And he had a daughter. I could hardly wait to learn more about her. What books did she read? What games did she play? What did she do when she thought no one was watching? If only she could be my friend, if only—

Georgie interrupted my daydreams with a jab of his elbow. "When do you think they'll get out of that truck?" he whispered, full of impatience as usual. "Heron Man just sits there and talks and talks."

"He must be telling the girl about the house," I said. "And Miss Lilian."

Georgie cowered beside me, suddenly fearful. "Don't say that name, Diana. It's bad luck." As he spoke, he peered at the house's boarded windows. Nothing moved except the vines rippling over the walls and the shadows they made.

I shivered, knowing my brother was right. We never spoke the old woman's name out loud, just as we never went too close to her house. Miss Lilian was the snake in the garden, the witch in the gingerbread house, someone to fear even though she was dead.

At last, the truck moved on and parked next to the trailer. We scurried after it and hid in a thicket of dead vines and pokeweed. Unseen, we watched the man and his daughter get out of the truck.

As Georgie had said, the man was just as tall and scrawny as a person can be, a human heron if I'd ever seen one. His shorts looked three sizes too big and so did his T-shirt. But he had a pleasant face and a nice smile.

I knew at a glance he wasn't like the other caretakers. Which made him more dangerous, I supposed. He was the sort who noticed things.

The girl was pretty, small and slender, about eleven or twelve years old. My age. Her hair hung down her back, smooth and wavy, so dark it shone with blue highlights in the sun.

The first thing the girl did was get the dog out of the truck. He was a big mutt, part golden retriever, part shepherd maybe. I couldn't tell if he was fierce or not, but he hadn't caught scent of Georgie and me yet.

"Give MacDuff some water," her father said, "but keep him tied, Lissa. I don't want him running off into the woods."

"Lissa," I murmured. It was a pretty name—a whisper, a sighing sound like a breeze blowing through a field of wheat.

I watched Lissa tie MacDuff to a tree and bring him a bowl of water. Leaving the dog lapping sloppily, she helped her father lift a shiny blue bicycle off the truck.

"A bike." Georgie nudged me. "Wouldn't you love to ride it?"

He didn't bother to hide the longing in his voice. Our bikes had disappeared a long time ago, soon after the bad thing happened. Despite the warm fall sunshine, I shivered at the memory.

"Maybe she'll leave it outside," I said, "and we can borrow it after dark for a moonlight ride."

"We could go a long way on a bike like that," Georgie said. "Miles and miles, on and on and on—"

"Yes, all the way to the gate and back," I reminded him.

He sighed and plucked a blade of grass to chew on. "I know, I know. I was just daydreaming, that's all." He sounded so sad that I was sorry I'd said anything. But I couldn't let him forget the rules.

Lissa leaned her bike against a shed. “Will it be safe here, Dad?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said. “We’re a mile from the road, and the gate’s locked. Who’d take it?”

Georgie and I pressed our hands over our mouths to keep from laughing out loud. They’d learn soon enough what was safe and what wasn’t.

“Give me a hand with some of these boxes, Lissa,” her father said.

We watched them come and go, carrying things into the trailer. To Georgie the best thing was the television. What pleased me most were the books, boxes and boxes of them. It had been a long time since I’d had anything new to read. Or anyone to talk to but my brother.

Without thinking, I said, “Wouldn’t it be fun to be friends with Lissa?”

Georgie stared at me, wide-eyed with shock. “Friends? We can’t be friends with her. You know that, Diana.”

I gazed past him at the trailer. I’d never wanted to break the rules before. Not once. For as long as I’d known what we could and couldn’t do, I’d accepted the rules completely. I’d stayed hidden, I’d never gone beyond the gate at the end of the drive, I’d kept away from Miss Lilian’s house. But now, for the first time, I was tempted.

I looked at Georgie. “How can it hurt to have a friend?”

He scowled. “I can’t ride that bike past the gate, and you can’t have a friend. We’re not allowed.”

Suddenly angry, I pinched his arm. “What can happen if just one little time—”

Georgie pulled away and rubbed his arm. “You’d better not talk like that,” he whispered. “You’ll ruin everything.”

“Ruin everything?” I glared at him. “It seems to me everything’s already ruined.”

Without answering, Georgie moved deeper into the shade. Behind him, the sun shone on a field where corn once grew. My brother and the trees were dark against the brilliance.

“Where are you going?” I was torn between following him and staying where I was, watching Lissa and her father.

“Nowhere.” Then he was gone.

Sometimes Georgie was such a baby. I hadn’t really hurt him. One little pinch. He deserved it for being such a spoilsport. Who did he think he was, telling me what to do? I was older than he was. He had no right to boss me

around. If I wanted to break the rules, he couldn't stop me. So I stayed put, with Nero beside me.

Through the trailer's open windows, I heard Lissa and her father debating where to put their things. I'd been inside and knew how small it was—two bedrooms, a tiny bathroom, a small kitchen, an eating area, and a living room. It was good they didn't have much furniture.

After a while, Lissa's father took the dog inside. I heard Lissa showing him his new sleeping place. "Right here in Daddy's room," she said. "I wish you could sleep in my room, but it's not big enough."

I waited a while, but when Lissa didn't come back outside, I slipped into the woods to find my brother. He'd gone to our hideout, an old shed almost covered by the wild grape, honeysuckle, and brambles growing around and over it.

When he saw me, he frowned. "What do you want?"

"I'm sorry I pinched you." I squatted beside him on the shed's dirt floor. "But you made me mad."

Georgie rubbed his arm. "You hurt me. Your fingernails are sharp."

I looked at my nails. Georgie was right. I'd let them grow long and sharp like claws. I flexed my fingers and made scratching motions like a cat. "Pfssst," I hissed at him.

Georgie edged away as if he didn't quite trust me. "You won't really break the rules, will you?"

"I'm sick to death of those stupid rules," I said. "Aren't you?

Georgie shrugged and picked up a stick. I watched him practice writing his name in the dirt. "I don't want to get in trouble," he said. "I don't want to be punished. Things could be worse, you know."

I sighed. It was hopeless to argue with Georgie. "But don't you miss friends and—"

Georgie pressed his warm hand over my mouth. "We promised not to talk about those things."

I pulled away from him. "But—"

"We promised, Diana!" Georgie got to his feet and covered his ears with his hands. If I said one more word, he'd run off again.

"All right," I said, "all right. Forget Lissa." Which of course I had no intention of doing.

Georgie grinned in relief. "Let's go down to the creek and catch minnows. It's cool and shady there."

I followed him across a field grown wild with milkweed and goldenrod. Purple-crowned thistles shot skyward. Bees droned around us, eager to get the last of the nectar before winter set in.

We saw a vixen and her kits playing in a hollow near their den. They watched us pass without running for cover. We meant them no harm and they knew it.

"You'd better be careful," Georgie called to the foxes. "A new caretaker has come. The last one set traps, remember?"

"And the one before that had a shotgun," I added.

The vixen pricked up her ears as if she intended to take heed of our warning. The kits tumbled about her feet, yelping and nipping at each other, too young to listen. What was danger? What were rules?They had no idea.

We passed a family of rabbits grazing on clover; a groundhog; a deer and her fawn. We told them what we'd told the foxes. It was silly, I supposed, but it made us feel better. We knew how to spring traps and ruin a hunter's aim, but we had no idea if we'd need our skills this time. We hadn't learned the ways of the new caretaker. But we'd find out, the way we always did—by watching and following . . . and waiting.

Chapter 2

When it was almost dark, Georgie and I sneaked back to the trailer. No matter how risky it was, we couldn't stay away. This time it was the smell of food cooking that drew us to the edge of the woods.

Lissa and her father were sitting at a sagging old picnic table that had been in the yard as long as the trailer. The wood was silver gray with age. Every caretaker who'd lived on the farm had carved his initials in the top. Georgie and I had carved ours more than once, using a jackknife we'd stolen from Mr. Wagner, one of the first caretakers. As Georgie had said, the old man could always get another one.

While hamburgers sizzled on a grill, Lissa sliced tomatoes. MacDuff watched eagerly, hoping a burger would come his way. Barely containing his appetite, he inched forward, making a little squeaky crying sound.

"Get back, MacDuff," Lissa's dad said.

MacDuff cried a little harder but backed off.

"Lie down, boy."

MacDuff obeyed, but he never took his eyes off those burgers.

Neither did Georgie.

With watering mouths, we watched Lissa and her father eat their dinner. I was glad to see they gave MacDuff his very own burger. But I wished, oh, how I wished, they'd give Georgie and me one, too. It would be so lovely to sink our teeth into hot juicy food again.

But the rules were the rules. They had to be obeyed. No burgers for us. Not tonight, not ever.

Heron Man smiled at Lissa. "Well, what do you think of our new home?"

"It's kind of spooky," she said slowly. "We've never lived in a place like this. No neighbors. Just woods and fields and that scary old house. I don't know if I'm going to like it or not.

"It will be a great place to write, though," her father said. "I might actually finish my novel here."

Lissa frowned. "What am I supposed to do while you sit at your computer?"

“You’ll have your schoolwork,” he said. “And three hundred acres of land to explore. You and MacDuff will have a lovely time.”

“How about friends? I’ll never meet anybody way out here.” She leaned across the table. “If I could go to school, real school, I’d—”

Heron Man shook his head. “You’ll get a much better education at home. School grinds kids down, destroys their minds and their imaginations. Makes them into conformists, unable to think for themselves—”

“Okay, okay!” Lissa got to her feet. “I’ve heard it all before.” Gathering her plate and glass, she went inside. *Bang!* went the door.

Heron Man sat at the table for a while. By now it was too dark to see his face, just the sharp outline of his nose and his crest of hair. In the kitchen, Lissa ran water in the sink and began washing dishes with a lot of clattering.

Georgie nudged me. “What’s wrong with her? She should be happy she doesn’t have to go to school.”

I sighed, too embarrassed to tell him how much I missed school myself—not arithmetic or geography or social studies, but reading and drawing and playing with my friends at recess. I missed my favorite teacher, Miss Perry, and my best friend, Jane, and a red-haired boy named Stephen. I missed jump rope and dodge ball and field trips. I even missed the cafeteria food.

Heron Man gathered his dishes and went inside. Through the kitchen window, I saw him give Lissa a kiss on the cheek. “There’s a YMCA not far from here,” he said. “I’ll sign you up for gymnastics. Would you like that?”

Lissa gave him a hug, and they finished the dishes together. When they’d dried the last fork, Heron Man said, “Shall we see if the television works?”

“TV,” Georgie whispered, “oh, let them watch TV. I’ve missed it since Mr. Potter left. He kept the TV on all night long. Remember? We could see and hear everything.”

I smiled, remembering the fun we’d had watching TV through the window while Mr. Potter dozed in his armchair. Sometimes Georgie sneaked inside and changed channels with the remote. Mr. Potter snored away, never suspecting a thing. Finally, Georgie decided to steal the remote to save himself the trouble of climbing through the window every night.

When he woke up, Mr. Potter noticed the remote’s disappearance and wasted hours searching for it, cursing up a storm the whole time. Then Georgie got the bright idea to change channels while Mr. Potter was awake. Sometimes he turned the volume up; sometimes he turned it down;

sometimes he'd switch the TV off, then back on. I couldn't help feeling a little sorry for Mr. Potter.

Not too long after Georgie stole the remote, Mr. Potter quit. We heard him tell the property manager the solitude was driving him insane. He was going to stop drinking, he said, and straighten his life out. Georgie and I felt good about helping Mr. Potter reform.

Lissa's answer disappointed Georgie. "I think I'll just go to bed and read for a while," she said. "I'm tired, Daddy."

He yawned. "I'm pretty done in myself. We've had a big day."

The kitchen light went off and the bathroom light came on. In a few moments, the light in the small bedroom came on, too.

Without a word, Georgie and I sneaked across the yard to Lissa's room. We'd peeked in the windows many times before, often with pranks in mind. To make things easier, we'd hidden cinder blocks in strategic places. Standing on them, we could look in any window except the one in the bathroom, which was higher than the others. Of course, we wouldn't have looked in the bathroom even if we could have. People deserve some privacy.

Lissa was already in bed. The grumpy old men caretakers had used her room for storage, but now it was clean and neat. A green and yellow rag rug covered most of the old linoleum tile. A small desk, a narrow bookcase, and a white dresser with a mirror were crammed into the tiny space, along with Lissa's bed, painted white to match the dresser. She'd made a little nest of pillows and quilts and stuffed animals, and she looked cozy and comfortable snuggled into it, a book propped up on her knees.

After a while, Georgie nudged me. "Let's go for a ride on her bike."

We climbed down quietly from the cinder block and ran silently across the yard to the shed. The bike leaned against the wall, its chrome handlebars bright in the moonlight.

"Do you remember how to ride?" Georgie whispered.

"Of course." I walked the bike to the long dirt driveway leading away from the house. "Wait here. I'll go first."

"It was my idea," Georgie said. "I should go first."

"This bike is different from your old Schwinn. It has gears and hand brakes like the Raleigh I used to have. Let me try it first and then I can show you how everything works."

Georgie scowled and stuffed his hands in his pockets. “It’s not fair. You aren’t the queen of the world.”

“No, not of the whole world.” I straddled Lissa’s bike. “Just the queen of Oak Hill Manor.”

With that I pushed off and left Georgie behind. Ahead of me, the drive tunneled between massive oaks, dark with shadows, but lit here and there with patches of moonlight. The bike bounced over ruts. The cool night breeze blew in my face, bringing with it the smells of damp earth and fallen leaves. Exhilarated by speed, I hunched over the handlebars and pedaled hard. I imagined myself riding around the world, flying to the moon, coasting down the Milky Way. Like Georgie, I yearned to escape—to leave Oak Hill Manor forever.

Five deer surprised me. They stood in the middle of the drive, their eyes on me, unsure what to do. I swerved around them as they dashed into the woods, graceful as gazelles. Somehow I managed to control the bike, but my dream of flying vanished into the shadows with the deer.

The drive emerged from the trees into a grassy area. Just ahead was the locked gate and its “No Trespassing,” “Private Property,” “Keep Out” signs. Beyond was the road—and the rest of the world.

I laid the bike down in the weeds and went to the fence. Hidden in the underbrush, I watched the cars speed by, their headlights sweeping over me. Every year there was more traffic, more people, more houses. Where fields and woods had once been, homes had sprung up. I could see their lights across the highway.

Suddenly, Georgie was beside me. “You said you’d come right back!”

I turned to him. “Don’t you wonder where all those people are going? Look at them, just driving and driving.”

“I wish we were in one of those cars, going far, far away,” Georgie said. “To California, maybe. Wouldn’t you love to see the Pacific Ocean?”

I patted his shoulder. “Yes, but—”

Georgie’s smile faded and he leaned against the fence, watching the headlights go by. “Don’t say it,” he said sadly. “I know, I know.”

“Hey,” I said, “it’s your turn to ride the bike.”

Turning my back to the road and the cars, I picked up the bike and held it steady for Georgie. His legs weren’t quite long enough, so he had to stand up to pedal.

“Don’t shift the gears,” I told him. “They work fine just the way they are. If you need the brakes, squeeze these.” I put his hands on the levers. “But don’t squeeze hard. If you stop too fast, you’ll go right over the handlebars.”

As he started to pedal back toward the house, I called after him, “Go slow at first. Get used to the feel of it. Your Schwinn was much heavier.”

“Don’t boss me,” Georgie said. “I know how to ride a bike.”

“And watch out for deer,” I added. “I almost hit one.”

This time he ignored me. Wobbling from side to side, he pedaled into the dark tunnel of trees. I ran after him, but he was soon out of sight. A few seconds later, I heard the bike’s bell, followed by a loud crash and my brother’s cry.

By the time I found Georgie, he’d righted the bicycle. “There was a fox in the drive,” he said tearfully. “I missed him, but I smashed into that tree.”

Georgie hadn’t hurt himself, but the bike’s front wheel was twisted and the tire was flat. “Nobody can ride it now.” He gave the bike a kick. “Flimsy old thing.”

If he hadn’t looked so upset, I would have pinched him for ruining our moonlight bike rides when they’d barely begun. “Why couldn’t you have been more careful?”

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled.

I yanked the bike away from him. “Now what do we do?”

“Put it back where it was,” he suggested. “Maybe they won’t notice right away.”

I shook my head. “We’ll hide it. They’ll think someone stole it.”

Georgie brightened. “Maybe Lissa’s dad will buy her a new one.”

“Maybe.” Pushing the bike ahead of me, I followed a deer trail deep into the woods. When I came to the creek, I shoved the bike down the bank and watched it splash into the water. It came to rest behind a clump of pokeberries. No one would find it there.

Without another word, we left the bike where it had fallen and headed for home.

The Diary of Lissa Morrison

Dear Diary,

Is this how you start? I never kept a diary before, so I'm not sure. Up till now I thought my life was too boring to think about, let alone write about, but that's changing. This is the second day Dad and I have spent here, and already strange things are happening.

First of all, the old Willis house is the creepiest place you ever saw. It's got to be haunted. Dad says the old lady who owned it was really eccentric, maybe even crazy. Anyway, she died in the house—in the front parlor, where she slept because she got too old to climb the steps to her bedroom. She lay there dead for a week before anyone found her. Ugh.

It seems like the perfect setup for a ghost, don't you think? She died there—all alone. Think about it. I can almost see her, can't you? A weird old lady, white hair, scary face, roaming around from room to room, up and down the steps, watching, waiting—oooh, I'm scaring myself.

Do you believe in ghosts, Dear Diary? Dad definitely doesn't. I talked to him after dinner about Miss Willis—that's the old lady's name—and I asked him if he thought she haunted the house. He laughed. I hate it when he laughs at me. Like he thinks I'm silly. Or dumb maybe.

If my mother was here, I know she wouldn't laugh—but she died when I was so little I can hardly remember her. Someday I'll write more about how much I miss her, but I don't want to make myself feel sad. So I will just say I wish she was here right now and we were sitting close together reading a book or something.

I know this sounds odd, Dear Diary, so don't tell anyone, but I'd love to see a ghost—just to know for sure they exist. I wouldn't be scared. At least, I don't think I'd be. How could a ghost actually hurt you? They're just ectoplasm or something, not solid.

Maybe it's because of my mother; maybe that's why I wonder so much about what happens when you die and where you go and if you can stay on earth for a while. I'd really like to know.

Now here's something else to tell you, something different. Not supernatural but scarier in a way because it's real. The first day we came to the farm, there was someone in the woods spying on us. Kids maybe. I'm sure of it. I could feel them watching me. I swear

my scalp prickled. I had the same feeling while we were eating dinner last night—they were back, spying again.

I told Dad, but he says it's my imagination. I'm in a new place, I'm not used to woods all around, I hear birds and squirrels and think they're people. The way he talks,you'd think I didn't have an ounce of sense.

Maybe I should give Dad some of my spare imagination. It might help him finish that book so he can get a better job and we can live in a house with a yard and neighbors and I can go to school and have friends—instead of spies in the woods.

But that's not all—someone stole my bike last night. Dad can't blame that on birds or squirrels! We searched all over, but there's not a sign of it. My beautiful new blue bike is really and truly gone.

Dad called the police and they came out and talked to us. They said teenagers sometimes sneak onto the property and most likely that's who took my bike. When I told them I thought someone was spying on us, one of the policemen said it must have been the same kids who stole my bike. They live in a development just across the highway from the farm. The police have had trouble with them trespassing before.

The other policeman shook his head. "Funny things happen out here," he said. "None of the caretakers stay long. Place gives them the jitters, they say. Some of them claim it's haunted by the old lady who used to live here. Her and the poor—"

The first policeman coughed and said, "We'd better get going, Novak. We've got other business."

I had the funniest feeling he didn't want us to hear what Officer Novak was about to say. In case you haven't noticed, that's how it always is with adults—just when someone starts telling the interesting stuff, someone else shuts him up. I glanced at Dad, hoping he'd ask him what he was talking about, but he was watching MacDuff chase a squirrel.

Officer Novak jingled his keys and looked at me. "Don't go too far from the trailer," he said. "There's no telling who might he hanging out in the woods. And stay away from the old house."

"I hear there's a bunch of snakes in the cellar," the first policeman said. "And the floorboards are rotten in some of the

rooms."

The two of them got in the police car. "Keep your eye out," the first one told Dad. "If you see anything suspicious, give us a call."

Officer Novak looked at me as if something was worrying him, but all he said was, "That's a real nice dog you've got."

We watched them drive away. I was hoping they'd turn their lights and siren on, but they didn't. I guess they only do that in movies.

So now Dad thinks I might have been right about kids hiding in the woods, spying and stealing stuff. Three hundred acres—there must be a ton of hiding places on this farm.

I'm going to look for them. If I find them, I'll tell them to give my bike back—or else they'll end up in jail or juvenile detention. They can't scare me. And neither can Miss Willis.

Well, I've written so much my hand hurts, so I think I'll stop and read in bed for a while. It sure is dark outside. Not a streetlight. Not a house light. Not even a headlight going past.

Your friend, Lissa

P.S. I'm going to call you Dee Dee. It makes you seem more like a real pen pal.

Chapter 3

The sound of falling rain woke Georgie and me. It pinged on the shed's tin roof like someone was beating on it with drumsticks. Nero curled beside me, purring, happy to be warm and dry. Georgie looked less happy.

"Rain. I hate rain." He snuggled deeper under his blankets, as if he meant to sleep until the sun came out. "I wish we had a new book to read."

I looked at the pile of old books we'd borrowed from Miss Lilian. "How about *Clematis*? We haven't read that for a long time."

"I said a *new* book. I'm sick of those old ones. Especially *Clematis.* It's a silly girly girl story." Georgie pulled the blankets over his head. "Besides, I hate sappy endings."

I yanked the covers back and laughed at his scowling face. "Tonight we'll borrow a book from Lissa," I promised. "She has a whole shelf full of them. Surely she won't miss one or two."

"I want a story right now," Georgie mumbled. "Tell me the one about us."

"But it always makes you cry."

"Tell it anyway."

I sighed and stretched out on my back beside him. "Once there was a little boy named Georgie," I began. "He had a big sister named Diana. They lived in a little house on a big farm with their mother and father. It wasn't their farm. It belonged to Mr. and Mrs. Willis, but Georgie and Diana could play anywhere they wanted. Inside and outside."

"Upstairs and downstairs," Georgie added. "Diana and Georgie were so happy."

"Most of the time," I said.

"All of the time," Georgie insisted. "They rode bicycles—their very own bicycles. And they had lots of books to read. They had warm beds. And food, delicious food. Ice cream, candy, cake, and cookies, all they could eat."

Lulled by the rain into a dreamy state like Georgie's, I said, "Devil's food cake was their favorite. And chocolate chip cookies still warm from the

oven, all gooey and sweet. Mother read to them every night and Daddy took them fishing in the pond."

"And Diana played the piano every single day." Georgie snuggled closer. "Those were the best times ever."

"Except for Miss Lilian." I was sorry the moment the old woman's name popped out of my mouth. It hung in the air for a long moment, a dark cloud over our heads, a curse nothing could dispel.

Georgie drew away from me and covered his ears. "Stop, Diana! Don't tell the bad part."

"But you said—"

"I've changed my mind." Throwing his covers back, Georgie got to his feet and dashed out into the rain.

"Georgie!" I ran to the shed's door and peered after him, but he was already out of sight. "Come back," I called. "You'll get soaked."

There was no answer, just the sound of the rain and the wind stripping the trees, filling the air with ragged yellow leaves.

"Georgie," I called again. Still no answer. He'd probably stay away all day, holed up in one of his secret hideouts.

I stepped back from the sheets of water pouring off the roof. If I hadn't mentioned Miss Lilian, my brother and I would still be telling tales about the old days, amusing ourselves while the rain fell and the wind blew. Now Georgie was gone and I was alone.

To keep myself from thinking about the bad part, I rummaged through our pile of moldering belongings until I found *Clematis.* I made a snug nest of blankets for myself, not nearly as cozy as Lissa's soft, clean bed, and opened the book. Just inside the front cover, spidery handwriting proclaimed, "This book belongs to me, Lilian Willis."

Well, not anymore, I thought. It's mine now.

As the wind murmured through the cracks in the shed's walls, I could almost hear my mother's voice reading to me the way she once did. It would be lovely to cuddle up beside her while Georgie sat nearby, building block towers and pretending not to listen. We'd have hot chocolate by the fire, and slabs of devil's food cake. So warm, so cozy, rain falling outside, firelight glowing inside.

Drowsy-eyed, I let the book drop to my side. Snuggling deeper under the covers, I drifted into dreams of happy days with Mother and Daddy.

I slept most of the day, but Georgie didn't come back till after dark. Nero heard him before I did. He leapt from his place beside me, his ears pricked up, and ran to the door to welcome my brother.

"Where have you been?" I asked him.

Georgie flopped down on his pile of blankets, shaking off water like a dog. "You should have come with me. I went to the trailer and I—"

"Did you see Lissa?"

"I saw her and her father." He paused a second. *"And* the police. Mr. Morrison—that's their last name, I heard the police say it—called them about the bike. One cop said kids from town probably stole it, but the other said strange things happen here. He told them how none of the caretakers stay long. How some of them spread stories about ghosts and other weird stuff."

"Booooooo," I moaned in a ghostly voice. *"Booooooo!"*

We laughed, knowing exactly who was to blame for the caretakers' abrupt departures.

"What did Lissa's father say?" I asked.

"He just laughed, but Lissa told the police she's sure people are hiding in the woods. She feels them watching her. The policeman said they were the same kids who stole the bike. He thinks they live in those houses across the highway."

"Was Lissa scared?"

Georgie shook his head. "She seemed more mad than anything. If you ask me, she's kind of spoiled. You know, only child and all that. I bet she always gets her own way."

I picked up Nero and rubbed his head with my chin. The cat purred, but I frowned. What did Georgie know about Lissa? He was a boy, after all. He didn't know anything about girls. Lissa was nice, I could tell. She'd be a good friend, if only—if only, if only, if only.

"The policeman warned Lissa to stay close to the trailer and not to go to Miss Lilian's house," Georgie went on. "If Lissa and her father see anything suspicious, he wants them to call right away."

I lay on my back with Nero on my chest, purring so loudly I could feel his whole body vibrating. "I'm glad Mr. Morrison doesn't believe in ghosts," I said. "It would be awful if he quit. He and Lissa are much more interesting than the grumpy old men who usually take the job."

Georgie shrugged. "He sure was mad about the bike."

“I’m mad about the bike, too.”

“I said I was sorry.” Georgie rubbed his hair dry with a blanket and took off his wet clothes. In a pair of baggy pants that used to belong to Mr. Potter and a sweatshirt he’d found in the woods, Georgie looked smaller than ever.

I got to my feet, tired of being indoors. “Let’s see what they’re doing now.”

The night air was cold and thick with mist. The rain had stopped, but the trees were dripping and the ground was wet. We mucked through the woods and across the field. In the gloom, we saw the trailer’s cheerful lighted windows.

Lissa and her father were in the living room playing checkers. MacDuff lay beside Lissa, his nose on his paws, sound asleep.

“We should borrow the checkers, too,” Georgie whispered. “I’m tired of playing with stones and acorns. Just think, a real board instead of squares scratched in the dirt.”

I put my finger to my lips. “Hush. Do you want to wake MacDuff?”

We watched Mr. Morrison win the game by capturing Lissa’s last king. “Time for bed, kiddo,” he said.

“Just wait till tomorrow night.” Lisa smiled and kissed him good night. “I’ll beat you.”

“We’ll see about that.” Her father got to his feet and turned off the light.

Georgie and I sneaked around to Lissa’s window and hopped up on the cinder block. She was already in bed, reading. I squinted hard at the title. *Lassie Come-Home*—one of my favorites. I longed to read it again. I’d begged Daddy to let me have a collie just like Lassie, a dog who would love me best of all and be loyal and true. But he’d said no. Miss Lilian wouldn’t allow a dog on her property. It might frighten her cats.

Georgie made a slight noise, and Lissa looked straight at the window. We ducked down.

“Be still,” I whispered. “She almost saw us.”

The next time I raised my head, Lissa was reading again. Finally, she yawned, closed the book, and laid it on the table beside her bed.

When she turned off her light, Georgie nudged me. “Should I sneak in and get the book now?”

I shook my head. “Give her time to fall sound asleep.”

“Let’s see what her father’s doing,” Georgie suggested. “His light’s still on.”

We crept to the other side of the trailer. “Where’s MacDuff?” I whispered to Georgie.

He climbed up on the cinder block ahead of me. “In here,” he whispered.

Sure enough, there was MacDuff, curled up in a dog nest as cozy as Lissa’s bed. Mr. Morrison sat at his desk, working on his computer. It was the first one we’d ever seen, except in television ads. While we watched, words formed themselves into sentences and paragraphs on the screen. Like magic, I thought.

“He must be working on his novel,” I whispered. “I wonder what its about.”

“We could borrow his computer and read it.” Georgie grinned. “I bet the novels boring, but it would be fun to have a computer.”

“I think you need electricity to make one work.”

“Too bad,” Georgie muttered.

After Mr. Morrison quit for the night, we returned to Lissa’s window. Georgie lifted the screen quietly. He’d gotten very good at borrowing, much better than I had.

Cautiously I followed him inside. He could have taken the book by himself, but I wanted a closer look at Lissa’s room. While Georgie waited impatiently, I examined her stuffed animals, her books, the pictures on the walls.

I pointed to a photograph in a silver frame. “Look, Georgie,” I whispered, “that must be her mother. She looks just like Lissa.”

Georgie picked up the photograph and studied it. “I wonder what happened to her,” he said. “Do you think she died?”

Saddened by the thought, I shook my head. “Maybe they got divorced. Lots of people do that now.” Another useful bit I’d picked up watching TV.

But Georgie’s interest had been caught by something else. Bending over Lissa, he carefully lifted the teddy bear lying beside her head and cradled it in his arms. “It’s just like the bear Miss Lilian took away from me,” he said. “She said I stole Alfie, but Mrs. Willis gave him to me. Remember how I cried and cried?”

Just then Lissa sighed in her sleep and rolled from her side to her back. Scared of waking her, I grabbed *Lassie Come-Home* and headed for the window, with Georgie right behind me.

We must have made more noise than we’d thought, because MacDuff started barking before we’d crossed the yard. We heard Mr. Morrison yell at

the dog to be quiet. Lissa called out from her room, and the outside light flooded the yard.

Without waiting to see what would happen next, we fled into the woods. It wasn't until we were safely home that I noticed Georgie had brought the bear with him. He fell asleep that night holding it as tightly as he'd once held Alfie. I hadn't seen him look so happy in a long time.

The Diary of Lissa Morrison

Dear Dee Dee,

Something even more scary has happened. While I was asleep last night, someone came in my room and stole Tedward and Lassie Come-Home. *Dad says I must be mistaken, I just forgot where I put them—but I know Tedward was on my pillow; I sleep with him every night. My book was on the table beside my bed. When I woke up, they were both gone.*

I bet the same kids who stole my bike took my bear and my book. They have a lot of nerve to come into my room while I'm sleeping. They could have murdered me! How can I ever sleep in my bed again? I'll have to keep MacDuff in my room to protect me.

Oh, Dee Dee, I don't know what I'll do without Tedward. He's my most special toy, my favorite, the one I love best of all. My mother gave him to me when I was five years old, not long before she died. I've slept with him ever since. Now he's been kidnapped and I want him back! What do those kids want with a little brown bear? I love him so much.

Dad says Tedward and my book will turn up, but I doubt it. I wonder what they'll steal next. I hope they take something that belongs to him. His computer maybe. Then he'll know how it feels.

If only Dad would fix the lock on my window. But oh, no, he's too busy working on his book to do anything like that. He won't even help me search for those kids. He says they're long gone, but he called the police and reported it, just the same.

If they dare to come back, I'll sic MacDuff on them. He'll give them a bite they won't forget!

Oh, Dee Dee—I wish you were real and could write back to me and tell me what you think. I feel like I'm talking to myself, going on

and on, writing letters nobody will ever read.

Well, that's all for now. I guess I'll take MacDuff for a walk. And keep my eyes peeled, as people say—which is a very weird expression when you think about it. Eyes peeled like grapes. Ugh.

See ya later—
Your friend, Lissa

Chapter 4

The next morning Georgie and I made ourselves comfortable in our favorite tree, and I began reading *Lassie Come-Home* to him. Nero climbed to a high branch and stretched himself along its length like a panther surveying his kingdom. He dozed lightly, as cats do, swinging his tail from time to time to show he was keeping an eye on us.

The first thing I noticed about Lissa's book was that the pictures were exactly the same as I remembered. There was Lassie, sitting at the gate, waiting for her boy, Joe. And the words were the same, too. "'Everyone in Greenall Bridge knew Sam Carraclough's Lassie,'" I read. "'In fact, you might say that she was the best-known dog in the village—and for three reasons.'"

I leaned against the tree's rough bark and smiled at Georgie. "Isn't that a great beginning?"

"Go on," Georgie said. "What happens next? What are the three reasons?"

I read the first three chapters. I'd meant to stop after one, to make the book last longer, but Georgie insisted I keep going. Like me, he was furious when Sam Carraclough sold Lassie and even more furious when the dog was mistreated by Hynes, the evil kennel man. He finally agreed to let me stop for the day when it seemed Lassie was about to escape from the kennel and meet Joe at school as she always did.

"Now Joe will get to keep Lassie," Georgie said with confidence. "The duke will see that Lassie loves Joe too much to take her away from him. And he'll fire Hynes."

Of course, Georgie was wrong. It wouldn't be much of a story if everyone got to be happy right away.

I hid Lissa's book in a special hole in the tree trunk where we kept other things—the TV remote, plus a jackknife and a ball of string we'd also borrowed from Mr. Potter, and a cigarette lighter and a flashlight we'd borrowed from Mr. Allesandro. I suppose that sounds bad, but they were all

things we thought we might need someday. It wasn't as if we had a choice. What are people to do if they have no money?

With Nero at our heels, as faithful as a dog, we made our way through the fields and woods to the trailer. Even Georgie couldn't stay away.

Lissa was sitting on the steps. MacDuff lay by her side, panting in the fall heat. Mr. Morrison was inside, writing. Every now and then, I heard him swear. Georgie giggled at the language the man chose to express himself, but Lissa paid no attention to her father. I guessed she was used to his way of talking.

Georgie poked my side. "Do you think Mr. Morrison puts words like that in his book?"

"I hope not."

"I could borrow a few pages," Georgie offered. "And you could read them to me."

I shook my head impatiently. "It's a book for adults," I said. "And probably boring—even with cussing in it."

Georgie caught a grasshopper, something practice had made him good at, and then let it go. "Lissa writes, too," he said, "in a little book."

"Her diary, probably," I guessed.

"I bet she writes about us—the spies and thieves in the woods," Georgie said. "Wouldn't you love to read what she thinks of us? It would be easy to borrow it."

Even though I would have loved to know Lissa's thoughts, I shook my head. "Diaries are secret books. You put your deepest thoughts and most private feelings in them, things you don't want anyone else to know."

I glanced at Lissa. The sun shone on her dark hair. "I used to have a diary, but I filled it up a long time ago. It had a lock," I told Georgie. "I kept the key on a chain around my neck."

"That flimsy lock didn't stop me." Georgie edged away, ready to run. "I know all about Stephen Jenkins and the dimple in his chin and how he asked you to be his girlfriend. And you let him kiss you at the sixth-grade picnic."

Forgetting about Lissa, I jumped up to chase Georgie, but he was gone like a flash. The two of us made so much noise Lissa got to her feet and stared across her yard at the woods.

"Thieves," she called. "You'd better bring my stuff back! My father called the police and they're after you."

MacDuff ran toward our hiding place, with Lissa right behind him, as mad as any girl I've ever seen.

Georgie had already disappeared, but I wasn't fast enough. I pressed myself against a tree trunk, hoping the sunlight and shadows would camouflage me. She'd called me a thief. Me, a thief. Didn't she know the difference between stealing and borrowing?

Just when I was sure MacDuff would find me, Nero came to my rescue. Making a loud rustling sound, he leapt out of the bushes right under MacDuff's nose. The dog forgot about me and ran after Nero. In a few bounds, the cat scrambled up a tree. Well out of MacDuff's reach, he arched his back and hissed at the dog.

"MacDuff! MacDuff!" Lissa tugged at the dog's collar, trying to pull him away from the tree. She was so close I could smell the shampoo she used, as sweet as honeysuckle. If it hadn't been for Nero, she would have seen me.

Mr. Morrison opened the door and stuck his head out. "What's all the commotion?" he yelled. "Has MacDuff treed a raccoon or something?"

"It's a big black cat," Lissa cried. "He's way up high in the tree. What if he can't get down?"

Mr. Morrison crossed the yard and grabbed MacDuff's collar. "Sit! Be quiet!"

MacDuff sat as commanded and stopped barking. Mr. Morrison peered up at Nero. The cat lashed his tail and growled. With his fur puffed up, he looked twice as big as normal, almost the size of a panther.

"It's a feral cat," Mr. Morrison said. "It can take care of itself."

"He's not feral," Lissa insisted. "He belongs to someone, I can tell. See how nice and shiny his coat is?"

"Mr. Maloney told me Miss Willis had dozens of cats," her dad said. "After she died, they ran off into the woods and went wild. I imagine there are hundreds of them out there."

"Can't you get him down, Dad?"

"With my luck, I'd fall out of the tree and break my neck." He patted Lissa's arm. "I'll take MacDuff inside. Don't worry. When the cat sees it's safe, he'll come down."

Lissa watched her father walk away with the dog. Then she looked up at Nero. "I used to have a black cat just like you, but he died last year. He was very old."

Nero began edging backward along the tree limb. Slowly he inched down the trunk. His claws made a scratching sound on the rough bark.

"Good boy," Lissa crooned as he descended, "good boy."

When Nero was low enough, Lissa lifted him from the tree and cuddled him in her arms.

"Would you like to be my cat? I'll keep you safe from MacDuff," she promised. "You can sleep on my bed at night. I'll feed you cream and sardines. And I'll call you Aladdin, like my old cat."

Nero gazed at Lissa as if he were considering her offer. I felt a twinge of jealousy. Suppose he decided to belong to Lissa? No more mice and shrews and moles, no more cold nights in the shed.

But no. In a flash, Nero jumped out of Lissa's arms. Stretching his slender body with each bound, he ran past my hiding place as if he had urgent matters to attend to. It might be a mouse hiding under a leaf, a squirrel twitching its tail on a tree trunk, a blue jay calling from a bramble bush. Away he went, ever alert, ever curious.

"Aladdin, Aladdin," Lissa called. "Come back. Kitty, kitty, kitty . . ."

For a moment I thought she was going to follow Nero and find me, but instead, she stood where she was and watched the spot in the woods where Nero had vanished, her face sad. I guessed she hoped he'd come back.

When that didn't happen, she sighed and returned to the steps. She picked up her notebook and her pen and began to write.

Before long, Mr. Morrison came to the door with MacDuff. "Do me a favor, Liss. Take MacDuff for a walk. He needs some exercise."

Lissa laid her diary on the step and set off across the yard. MacDuff bounded ahead, sniffing and searching the way dogs do.

"Where's she going?"

I spun around to face Georgie. "Don't ever sneak up on me like that again! You scared me half to death!"

"Sorry." Georgie's little smirk told me he wasn't one bit sorry.

"Let's follow her," I suggested, "and find out."

As usual, Georgie and I stayed in the deep shadows near the edge of the woods. Lissa and MacDuff walked in the sunlight. The dog ran in circles around the girl, sniffing the weeds, the bushes, the trees. Hundreds of grasshoppers leapt out of his way, but he didn't seem to be interested in them.

Trailing behind her dog, Lissa walked slowly toward Miss Lilian's house —just where she'd been told not to go. She must be a rule breaker, I thought. I glanced at Georgie. Maybe I'd break a few rules myself.

At the front steps, Lissa stopped and stared up at the double doors, secured with a rusty chain and padlock.

Georgie gripped my arm. "She's too close," he whispered. "What if she —"

"We have to stop her." I took a step toward the house, but Georgie tightened his hold on me.

"No. You can't let her see you!"

"But she might be in danger—"

"We can't do anything," Georgie insisted. "Besides, Lissa's not the one she wants."

Reluctantly I stepped back into the shade, unseen, unheard. Lissa was new to Oak Hill Manor. She knew nothing of the danger lurking behind those locked doors and boarded windows.

Instead of climbing the rotting steps, Lissa stood on the grass, her face wistful, and gazed at the house. She was still too close, much closer than I dared go. Could she hear anything stirring behind the walls?

"Oh, MacDuff," Lissa said. "Think how grand it must have been once. Can't you see guests arriving for parties, all dressed in fine clothes? They'd pull up right here in horse-drawn carriages. Inside the house, there'd be sparkling crystal chandeliers, dozens of candles, platters of delicious food, a band playing a waltz. Ladies and gentlemen would have danced all night long, twirling round and round till dawn."

Lissa held out her arms and spun, as if dancing to music only she could hear. MacDuff cocked his head and watched.

Georgie snickered, and I grabbed his arm as if I meant to pinch him. "Hush, she'll hear you," I whispered.

After a few seconds, Lissa dropped her arms and curtsied as if she were thanking an invisible partner for the dance. Then, with MacDuff bounding ahead, she walked around the house. Georgie and I followed, as silent as an extra pair of shadows.

At the rear, she climbed the shallow steps leading to the wide brick terrace that ran the length of the house. She sat on a stone bench supported by two crouching lions, their faces streaked with dark stains like tears. It

used to be my special seat, my throne. I hadn't even allowed Georgie to sit there.

"She's on your bench," Georgie whispered. "Don't you care?"

I shook my head. Seeing Lissa in my favorite place made me feel closer to her, as if she were truly my friend and I was sharing something important with her.

Georgie sighed and went to work on his mosquito bites. I slapped his hand. "Don't scratch. You'll make them worse."

He pulled away. "I'll scratch if I want to. What does it matter, anyway?"

I shrugged. "Do what you like. I'm sick of arguing with you."

I put some space between us and watched MacDuff run back and forth on the lawn, sniffing and wagging his tail. A pair of mourning doves hunted for food near a shaggy boxwood hedge, cooing to each other in their soft melancholy voices. Somewhere in the woods, a crow called and another answered.

In the fields, insects buzzed and chirped. High in the treetops the wind sighed in the leaves, blowing a few off. They spun through the air and twirled to the ground, landing with a dry rustle.

Lissa sat on the bench, as still as the stone cherubs perched on the terrace steps. She seemed to be watching the clouds, just as I had when I'd sat on that bench.

Georgie shifted his weight and sighed. "She never does anything but moon around. Just like you."

"If you're so bored, go away and do something else. I don't care."

"If I leave, how do I know you won't go over there and start talking to her?"

I stuck out my tongue. "You'll just have to trust me, won't you?"

Georgie made a worse face, but he wasn't sure what to do. Go or stay. Trust me or doubt me. "Promise you won't talk to her," he said at last.

I crossed my fingers behind my back and promised.

"I'll be back soon," he warned me.

In a moment, he was gone, swallowed by the woods as if he were more deer than boy. Left to myself, I continued to watch Lissa. MacDuff had wandered off, and she was alone on the terrace. I wished I knew what she was thinking.

After a while, she walked to the top of the brick steps and looked directly at the tree that hid me.

“I know you’re there,” she said. “Who are you? What do you want?”

I glanced behind me, thinking Georgie might be hiding nearby to see what I’d do. I heard nothing but a squirrel chattering on a branch and saw nothing but a crow winging from one tree to the next.

“Come out,” Lissa shouted. “Let me see your stupid, stealing faces!”

Tense as a deer at the edge of the woods, I stared at Lissa. Did anyone really care if she saw me? Would they even know? Maybe it was time to test the rules.

I drew in my breath as if I were standing on a high dive and took a tentative step toward her, still in the dense shade, still hidden, still safe.

Lissa remained where she was, her eyes fixed on my hiding place. Hands on hips, legs braced, she waited for me to show myself.

MacDuff was at the far end of the lawn, sniffing at something in a pile of old logs, his back to the house, unaware of my presence.

I took another small step. The vines screening me shifted and rustled. Cautiously I stepped into the sunlight and squinted across the ruined lawn at Lissa. Scared as I was, I raised my hand to wave and forced myself to smile.

Instead of returning my smile, Lissa gasped and stepped backward, almost falling over the lion bench. Without taking her eyes off me, she cried, “MacDuff! MacDuff!”

I froze, too shocked to move or speak. Lissa was afraid of me. What was wrong with her? Wasn’t I a girl like herself? Why should she be scared?

I longed to run to her and tell her I meant no harm. Surely she’d understand. She must be lonely. Like me, she must want a friend. But I didn’t dare approach her now, not with her looking at me as if I were a monster.

Again she called the dog, louder this time, her voice shrill and shaky with fear, her eyes fixed on me.

MacDuff heard Lissa this time. He started to run to her, but when he saw me, he swerved across the field in my direction, barking fiercely. In desperation, I turned and fled into the woods, stumbling over roots and stones, crying as I hadn’t cried for years.

Chapter 5

Behind me, I heard Lissa call the dog back. I leaned against a tree, breathing hard. Before I'd caught my breath, Georgie crashed out of the bushes, his face fierce.

"She saw you," he screamed. "You let her see you!"

"Oh, Georgie," I began, but he flung himself at me, pummeling me with his fists. I'd never seen my brother so angry.

"You stepped right out in plain sight," he shouted. "You did it on purpose!"

I shoved him away, grabbed his shoulders, held him at arm's length. "I'm sorry," I cried. "I'm sorry."

He struggled to escape, twisting and flailing like Nero when he didn't want to be held. "Why did you do it, Diana? Why did you break the rules?"

"I told you." I started to cry again. "I wanted to be Lissa's friend, but she was afraid of me. She sicced the dog on me. Why was she scared? What's wrong with me, Georgie?"

"How should I know?" With one huge effort, he broke free of me and ran into the woods.

"Wait!" I called. "I'm sorry, Georgie. Don't be mad."

By the time I caught up with him, Georgie had gotten over the worst of his anger. He got mad quickly and easily, but at least he didn't stay mad long.

"Lissa doesn't know who I am," I told him. "She doesn't know where I live. She's never even seen you. What harm can she do?"

Georgie thought for a while, his forehead creased with concentration. At last he said, "If you stay away from her, maybe she'll think she imagined you. That's what her father will tell her."

I pictured Lissa running home, screaming about something she'd seen in the woods. How would she describe me? I couldn't imagine. But Georgie was right—whatever nonsense she spouted, her father most likely wouldn't believe her. He'd say it was kids playing tricks on her. Maybe he'd tell her

to stay away from the old house. Maybe he'd remind her of what the policeman had said about the woods.

Georgie picked up a stick and began drawing little figures in the dirt. "If we stay away from the trailer, maybe nothing bad will happen. Lissa doesn't want to be your friend. Promise not to let her see you again." He dropped the stick and grabbed my wrists so tight it hurt. "Promise."

I mumbled something. At that moment, I had no desire to go near Lissa or the trailer. She'd been scared of me, repulsed. She'd called me a thief, sicced her dog on me. I didn't want to be her friend anymore.

That night, long after Georgie settled down to sleep, I lay beside him, thinking about Lissa. I saw her face again, heard her call the dog to run me off as if I were disgusting, maybe even dangerous. A trespasser. A thief.

What had she seen when she looked at me? What had frightened her? If only I could talk to her—surely I could convince her she was wrong to fear me. But doing that would mean breaking my promise to Georgie. Hadn't I just told him I'd stay away from the trailer?

I looked down at my brother. In the dim light, I saw fear flit across his face as if he were dreaming about the bad thing. "No," he muttered, "no, no. Mother, Mother . . ."

He rolled away from me and curled into a tight little ball, hugging Alfie. I stroked his back gently, soothing him, chasing away the nightmare. "Diana," he murmured, and fell into a deeper, more peaceful sleep.

As quietly as possible, I slid out from under the covers. Nero raised his head, blinked at me, and then cuddled closer to Georgie as if he, too, disapproved of my plans.

Outside, a curl of mist floated above the ground at the edge of the woods. The albino deer, my favorite, stood chest deep in the mist watching me. He let me come within a foot or two of him. Then he turned and ran, his pale body sliding through the shadows like milk.

From across the dark field, the trailer's windows glowed, beckoning me as if I had no more willpower than a moth drawn to a candle's flame. How I wished I could be inside with Lissa, playing checkers or reading. We'd swap funny stories that made us laugh till our ribs ached. I'd tell her about Stephen and that kiss. She'd tell me about a boy who'd kissed her. It would be like having Jane back—a friend who'd laugh at the same things I laughed at.

The trouble was Lissa didn't want to be my friend. She didn't want to share her secrets with me.

But I knew how to discover them.

I waited in the cold till the lights went out, one by one, and the trailer was dark. Even then, I lingered to make sure everyone, including MacDuff, was asleep. At last, I stepped carefully onto the cinder block and looked in Lissa's window. On the table beside her bed I saw what I'd come for—her diary.

With Georgie's skill, I slid the window open and climbed into Lissa's room. How still she lay. How peacefully she slept. I longed to wake her and tell her I meant no harm, but if she opened her eyes, I had no doubt she'd scream, more terrified of me in the dark than she'd been in the daylight.

I took the diary and tiptoed back to the window. Making almost no noise, I crawled out. Then I ran across the field. After a quick stop to get Mr. Allesandro's flashlight from the tree, I returned to the shed. Georgie still slept quietly, but Nero had gone off into the dark to hunt.

Blocking the flashlight's beam with my hand, I opened the diary and read the first entries. Most of what Lissa had written I already knew or had guessed. Except for the teddy bear. I hadn't realized he was special. I felt a slight pang of guilt, which vanished when I pictured Lissa's array of stuffed animals and dolls. She had so many. And Georgie had none. Surely he should be allowed to keep Alfie.

I turned the page and found the entry I was looking for.

Dear Dee Dee,

Wait till you hear this—it's so scary you might not even believe me. Dad doesn't. He thinks I imagined the whole thing, but it's true, I swear it is—every single word!

I took MacDuff to the old house today. If I'd known what was going to happen, I wouldn't have gone near the place. I walked around it and found an old terrace at the back. It's in ruins like everything else, but I sat on this pretty lion bench and tried to picture how it must have been once, with flowers and shrubbery and green grass stretching downhill to the woods. Soon I felt those kids watching me again, that same old prickle. I ignored them for a while, but I was getting madder and madder. They'd stolen Tedward

and my new bike and my favorite book. So I started yelling at them. Thieves, that's what I called them.

The bushes rustled. They were coming. I was kind of scared, but I screwed my face up into a scowl and waited. And then a monster came out of the trees.

Oh, Dee Dee, I've never seen anything so horrible in my life. It was filthy and ragged and its hair was tangled with twigs and leaves. It didn't even look human, Dee Dee. I don't know what it was. Bigfoot maybe. But smaller.

It was really and truly hideous. And it was coming straight toward me.

I was so scared I shook all over. Though I never have, I thought I might faint. I could hardly call MacDuff. My voice just dried up. But he came running and he chased the monster away. As soon as it was gone, I called him back because I was afraid he'd get hurt or maybe killed. Who knows what that thing was? Or how many of them might be hiding in the woods?

I ran all the way home and told Dad, but did he believe me? No, of course not. He said someone must be playing a trick on me. A kid dressed up in a weird outfit maybe. I asked him if he'd please call the police to search the farm and catch it, but of course he just laughed. He said if he called the police for every little thing, he would be like the boy who cried wolf. If something really bad happened, the police would think it was another false alarm and not come.

Dad must hate me. How can he expect me to live here now? I'm never *going outside again. Dad says fine, I can spend the whole day on my stupid home-school lessons. If only I could go to a real school and meet real kids instead of ogres in the woods.*

Oh, Dee Dee—what was that horrible creature? And what did it want? Does it have Tedward and my bike and my book? What will it take next? What if it's outside right now, watching me through my window? Why won't Dad at least buy me some curtains?

I am really, really scared.
Love, Lissa
WHO DID NOT IMAGINE THE MONSTER

I read the entry two or three times, scarcely able to believe what Lissa had written. How could she think such terrible things about me?

In my mind's eye, I tried to see myself as she had. It wasn't an easy thing to do. I hadn't thought about my appearance for years. When I'd stepped out of the woods, I'd been wearing what I wore now, what I always wore, a blouse and skirt that had once belonged to Miss Lilian. I'd forgotten how they looked—torn by brambles, stained and faded to the color of earth and moss, fluttering in rags and tatters.

I spread out my hands and examined them. My skin was grimy with dirt, my nails long and ragged. Briar scratches crisscrossed my arms and hands, as well as my legs and feet. My hair hung below my hips in an unwashed mass of tangles, matted with twigs and leaves and mud.

Till that moment I hadn't cared what I looked like. No one saw me except Georgie. We were used to each other, he and I.

But Lissa wasn't. Her clothes were clean and fresh. So were her hands and face. Her hair shone from shampoo.

Burrowing even deeper under my covers, I wept softly. Once I'd been as clean as Lissa. I'd worn nice clothes, too. My hair had been brushed and combed and shiny. I'd had a mother and a father and a home. And friends. But then the bad thing happened and everything changed. It wasn't my fault. Or Georgie's.

I poked my head out of the covers and took a good, long look at my brother. He, too, was a wild child, dirty and ragged, his hair a long mass of tangles. In fact, we looked like feral children, raised in the wilderness by wolves. Romulus and Remus. Mowgli with a sister.

It was enough to make me cry all over again. How had I let this happen to us? Georgie was my little brother. Why hadn't I taken better care of him?

Thoughts raced through my mind, one after another. Finally, I slipped out from under the blankets and found a pencil in Georgie's and my box of useful items.

Stealing glances at Georgie from time to time, I began to write on a blank page in Lissa's diary:

Dear Lissa,

I did not mean to scare you. Please accept my sincere apologies. I am not a monster. I am a twelve-year-old girl. My name is Diana. I

am very lonesome. I hope to be your friend, but after today I'm afraid you have the wrong idea about me.

It's true that my brother, Georgie, and I have spied on you and laughed at you and borrowed certain items, but if you knew us, you would understand. At least I hope you would. We lead a strange and lonely life. It is hard for us to keep clean and nice-looking, but I promise that the next time you see me I will look better. You won't be scared of me.

I hope you do not mind that I have read your diary. I am well aware that diaries contain secrets and are not meant to be shared with others, especially strangers (I once kept a diary myself), but I had to know what you thought of me. I promise I will never read it again. Cross my heart and hope to die if I do.

If you wish to meet me, go to the lion bench tomorrow afternoon and wait for me.

Please do not tell your father. No one must know about Georgie and me. We are not allowed to make friends.

In hope,
Diana

I read over what I'd written. In sixth grade, Miss Perry had insisted we all learn to compose proper letters in formal language. She would have been impressed with my grammar and spelling, though she might have found fault with my penmanship. Due to lack of practice, it was a little crooked but far neater than Lissa's large, round, loopy handwriting.

I hesitated. The terrace—was it safe to meet Lissa there? But where else? Not the trailer—her father would see me. Not in the woods—Georgie might see us. It had to be the terrace. As long as Miss Lilian stayed in the parlor, she had no way to watch the terrace.

With the flashlight in one hand and the diary in the other, I stole once more through the woods and across the field to the dark trailer.

I'd planned to return the diary to Lissa's room, but when MacDuff began barking, I tossed it on the picnic table and ran.

The old Willis house loomed ahead, dark and crooked against the starry sky. What I was about to do terrified me, but I could think of no other way to show Lissa I was a girl like herself.

Chapter 6

I sneaked around the side of the house and crawled into a thicket of bushes growing wild by the wall. There, unknown to any of the caretakers, was a small broken window. Back in the days when Miss Lilian and her cats inhabited the floor above, Georgie and I used it to sneak inside. Cautiously I wriggled through and dropped into the cellar.

A breath of cold, dank air met me, the smell of an old musty cellar shut away from sunlight. I shivered and shined the flashlight into the darkness. The basement was full of snakes, but that didn't worry me. Neither did the rustle of mice in the corners. I feared vague sounds—faint footsteps, mournful sighs, low whispers.

Hoping I was truly alone, I made my way around boxes, barrels, piles of newspapers, and broken furniture. I took care to avoid the dark recesses of the cellar and the door to the storeroom, still locked, its key long lost.

I'd never been in the house without Georgie. By the time I reached the rickety stairs leading to the first floor, my skin was clammy and my legs were shaky. Taking a deep breath, I put my foot on the first step, then the second. Slowly I climbed the stairs, stopping every time one creaked. At the top, I eased the door open and stood on the threshold, peering down the dark hall, first toward the kitchen and then toward the front of the house. No sound. No movement. On tiptoe, I edged along the wall, heading for the main staircase.

The air stank of cat pee and mildew. The floors and walls murmured to each other in creaks and groans. Wallpaper hung from the plaster in long, loose strips. Every now and then a current of air lifted them and their dry whispers joined the other sounds.

At last, I stood at the bottom of the once grand flight of stairs that led to the upper floors. I remembered Miss Lilian descending the very same stairs, dressed in gray, one thin hand grasping the rail, her head high, her eyes scornful. Behind her, my mother knelt and swept the carpeted steps with a whisk broom, collecting the dirt in a dustpan and watching me anxiously.

“You, girl, don’t play here,” Miss Lilian said. “Your mother’s working. She can’t be bothered with you now.”

The vision was so real I almost ran outside, the way I used to. But tonight the staircase was empty. No one was there. Not Miss Lilian. Not Mother.

As fearful as if the old woman still barred my way, I ran up the steps, staying so close to the wall I brushed against the family pictures hanging there, dusty, fly specked, faded to pale shades of brown.

Miss Lilian’s bedroom was at the end of the hall, the biggest and brightest, with a view of fields and woods and the road beyond. I walked toward the closed door, wincing every time a board creaked under my feet. She wasn’t in her room, I told myself. She’d died downstairs with her cats as witnesses. If she’d lingered—and I was sure she had—she’d be in the front parlor, behind its closed door. I knew the rules.

But I also knew the exceptions.

Taking a deep breath, I turned the knob slowly and pushed the bedroom door open.

Again I saw Miss Lilian as I remembered her, sitting in her big bed, watching my mother set down the breakfast tray, waiting while she poured the tea, finally spying me in the doorway. “Go away, thief. You’re after my jewelry, but you won’t get it. Not while there’s breath in my body!”

The bed was as empty as the stairs, its sheets frayed by mice. The jewelry had disappeared years ago, but the closets still held Miss Lilian’s clothing—skirts, blouses, and dresses long out of style but of fine quality except for moth holes.

I grabbed some clothes and stuffed them into a pillowcase, too scared to think about what would look best. No time to be choosy. Anything was better than the filthy rags I was wearing.

Half expecting Miss Lilian to stop me, I ran to the bathroom. Although the water had been turned off, Miss Lilian’s soaps and shampoos, her combs and brushes and towels, lay where she’d left them, dusty and cob webbed but still usable.

As I dumped toiletries into the pillowcase, a movement caught my eye. Miss Lilian stood a few inches away, watching me. She was wilder and stranger than ever, her hair long and tangled, her clothes in rags. I gasped and stepped backward and so did she, her face twisted in fear. I thrust out my hands to keep her away and she did the same. Close to fainting, I leaned

against the wall and stared at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. No wonder Lissa had been scared when I stepped out of the woods.

Lugging the bulging pillowcase, I hurried to the steps. It didn't matter how much noise I made now. I had to get out. The next time, it might really be Miss Lilian I saw.

At the bottom of the stairs, I stole a quick look at the parlor's closed door. Behind it, I heard barely audible movements and a low sigh.

Clutching my bundle, I fled down the hall to the cellar, tripping over newspapers and boxes in my haste. At any moment, I expected Miss Lilian to scream, "Stop, thief! Do you hear me? Stop!"

I shoved the pillowcase through the cellar window and scrambled out after it. Dropping small things as I ran, I fled into the woods. It was almost dawn. The trees were swathed in morning mist and the fallen leaves were damp and slippery underfoot. A rabbit leapt across my path, and I caught a glimpse of the albino deer in the field. His antlered head turned in my direction.

Before I reached the shed, Georgie came rushing to meet me. "Where have you been, Diana? I had a bad dream. And you weren't here."

I hid Miss Lilian's belongings behind my back and tried to edge past him. "I couldn't sleep," I said. "So I went for a walk."

"What's that?" Georgie grabbed at the bundle.

I thrust him away. "Nothing," I lied, "just some stuff from the trailer."

"I thought we were never going there again."

"Just this one last time."

"But what is it?" Georgie lunged at me again. "I want to see!"

This time he caught hold of the bundle and yanked hard. Out fell the brush, the comb, the soap, the shampoo, all rolling away in different directions.

I scurried around, picking everything up. "I can't stand being dirty anymore, that's all."

Georgie backed away from the soap as if it were poison. "I hope you don't expect me to use that junk!"

"It wouldn't hurt you to take a bath."

"Are you joking? I haven't taken a bath for ages, and neither have you."

"Don't you remember how nice clean clothes feel?"

"I like my clothes the way they are." He sniffed his shirt. "They smell like me."

“Maybe you smell bad,” I suggested.

“So what if I do?”

“Look at Nero.” I pointed to the cat, sitting in a patch of sunlight, carefully licking his paws and rubbing his face. “He washes.”

Giving me a sly grin, Georgie licked the back of his hand and rubbed his face with it. “There, that’s my bath.”

“I’m ashamed of you,” I said. “You’re absolutely filthy and you don’t even care. What would Mother think?”

Georgie’s smile vanished. “Don’t say that! Don’t! Mother’s gone, Diana. She doesn’t care what happens to us anymore!”

I glared at him, unable to think about what he’d just said. “Stay dirty, see if I care.”

Leaving Georgie to sulk, I ran across the field to the pond. Stripping off my clothes, I let them fall to the ground in a filthy heap. If I washed them, they’d fall to pieces. I waded into the pond, shivering as the cool water rose higher on my legs.

By the time I was belly deep, my skin was a mass of goose bumps, but it didn’t bother me the way it once would have. Georgie and I had gotten very tough in the years we’d lived on our own. In fact, nothing ever really hurt us. At least not for long.

Taking a deep breath, I sank under the surface and then stood up, wet all over. I began to scrub. And scrub. And scrub.

When my skin glowed pink and clean, I began working on my hair. At first I made no headway against its obstinate mats and tangles. I shampooed and brushed, shampooed and combed until my scalp throbbed. If I’d had a pair of scissors, I’d have cut it all off.

At last, I managed to pull the comb through my hair from roots to ends. Satisfied I’d done all I could, I waded out of the pond and sat in the sun. As soon as my skin was dry, I pulled on a flowered skirt. It settled on my hips and trailed in the grass. Like the skirt, the blouse I’d taken was several sizes too big, but at least both things were clean and neither was torn or stained. Surely Lissa wouldn’t be afraid of me now. Why, even without shoes, I felt almost civilized.

My hair was still wet, so I sat and combed it, tugging at the last of the tangles till I was sure no sticks or leaves clung to it.

Suddenly, Georgie stepped out of the woods and stopped, clearly astonished at the sight of me. “Diana,” he whispered. “Is that you?”

“Of course it’s me, silly.” I laughed and tossed my hair. With no tangles to weigh it down, it flew free around my face, as clean and sweet with shampoo as Lissa’s.

Georgie came closer and touched my hair. “I forgot it was so light.”

“Yours would be the same color, too, if you’d let me wash it.”

Georgie backed away fast. “You’re not touching me!”

I spread my hands. “Okay, okay. But if you change your mind—”

“No chance of that.” Georgie scrutinized me from a safe distance. “Where did you get those clothes?”

I stood up and twirled so the long flowered skirt floated around me. “Isn’t it pretty?”

Georgie stared at me, his eyes fearful. “You didn’t get that stuff from the trailer,” he whispered. “Those are *her* things. Her clothes. Her soap. Her comb. Her brush. You went in her house, didn’t you?”

I shrugged. “We’ve gone in there before.”

“Not since she died,” Georgie whispered. “What if you disturbed her?” Under the grime, his face looked pale. “Did you see her?” he persisted. “Or hear her?”

“No.” I fidgeted with my hair, unable to meet his eyes. Uneasily, I remembered the faint sounds behind the parlor’s closed door and the terror I’d felt as I ran through the dark cellar.

Forgetting his fear of a bath, Georgie came closer. “Something scared you. I can tell.”

I shook my head. “Mice,” I said. “There was nothing there but mice.” Near my foot a grasshopper clung to a tall weed, his antennae turned toward me. I nudged the weed and watched him jump away.

“What made you go inside?” Georgie’s voice rose. “You never cared about being dirty before.”

I looked at him and wrinkled my nose, deliberately insulting him. “You smell bad, you know that? You stink!”

Georgie drew in his breath sharply. “It’s because of Lissa. You still want to be her friend, don’t you?”

“No,” I lied. “I just don’t want to be dirty like you!”

“I hate Lissa.” Georgie’s eyes filled with tears, streaking his cheeks as they ran down his face. “Nothing’s been the same since she came. We never used to fight. I hate her, I hate her!”

Instantly sorry, I reached out for him, but he was already running toward the woods. In a moment, he'd vanished and I was alone in the sunny field.

Maybe I should have run after him and apologized, but he'd made me angry talking like that. I'd gone into the house and taken only what I needed, just a few little things. No one had stopped me. Nothing had happened. At least not yet.

So instead of following Georgie, I sat in the sunshine and braided my hair into a long single plait, as thick and heavy as rope, and tied it with string. When I was done, I felt calmer. Georgie would get over his anger. He'd see I hadn't done anything so terrible.

Nero sat nearby, watching me, his tail flicking. I picked him up and burrowed my face in his soft black fur. "Now I'm as clean as you. And I smell good, too."

The cat twisted out of my arms. In a flash he was gone, bounding through the weeds in pursuit of whatever small animal might cross his path. Maybe he preferred my old familiar smell. Well, let him play with Georgie, then. Persnickety old thing—what did I care? Soon I'd have a new friend, a real friend, a girl to talk to and laugh with.

I squinted at the sun. It was past noon. Had Lissa found her diary? Read what I'd written? Did she plan to meet me at the terrace? Would she really and truly be my friend?

I ran across the field and into the woods, eager to see what she was doing. Near the trailer, I heard Mr. Morrison's voice. I dropped to my knees and crawled noiselessly through the underbrush until I was close enough to see and hear. Lissa sat at the picnic table, surrounded by books, her diary among them. Her father sat across from her, drilling her with math problems. MacDuff lay at his feet, dozing peacefully in the sunlight.

"Come on, Liss," Mr. Morrison said patiently. "You're not concentrating."

Lissa frowned at the page in front of her. "I don't care whether car A or car B gets to Chicago first. It's a boring problem."

Mr. Morrison sighed and pulled a pipe out of his shirt pocket. I watched him light it. The scent of tobacco drifted across the grass and I breathed it in, reminded of my father. He'd often smelled of the same sort of tobacco, aromatic, a little strong, but, unlike cigarette smoke, pleasant.

I wished I could go closer, join Lissa and her father at the picnic table, sit between them as if I were part of a family again. Filled with longing, I

wiped tears from my eyes with the back of my hand. Wish all you want, I told myself, it won't happen.

"You'll never finish the problems at this rate," Mr. Morrison said. "And you've still got science, history, and French to go.

Lissa grimaced and bent her head over the paper. Mr. Morrison leaned on his elbows and smoked, gazing at the fields and woods as if they were his own personal estate. For a moment, he looked right at me. I ducked lower, ready to run, but apparently he was too absorbed in his own thoughts to realize I was just a few feet away.

After a while, Mr. Morrison stretched his long skinny arms and stood up. "Can I trust you to sit here and work on those problems while I go inside and write?"

"Sure." Lissa watched him return to the trailer. The moment the door banged shut behind him, she opened her diary. She read what I'd written, I was certain of it, and then looked right at my hiding place.

"You're there, aren't you?" she said. "Diana, that's your name, and you want to be my friend."

I didn't answer. We were too close to the trailer. Her father might step outside for some reason and hear me.

"I must be crazy, but I'll meet you on the terrace," she said. "I'll have MacDuff with me—for protection. You'd better be telling the truth and you'd better be alone. Don't try anything funny, either."

At the sound of his name, MacDuff raised his head hopefully and watched Lissa run inside. In a few seconds she was back with his leash. While she fastened it to his collar, I took off through the woods, planning to get to the terrace before she did.

I made a wide circle around the house, afraid now of the front windows. The plywood covering them was cracked. Perhaps Miss Lilian was peering out from the dark, watching me go by dressed in her clothes, loathing me even more than before.

Cautiously I approached the terrace and climbed its broad steps. No sign of the old woman. No sound. Hoping she didn't know I was near, I perched on the edge of the lion bench. Intensely aware of the silent house behind me, I waited for Lissa.

A breeze ruffled the weeds growing tall on the lawn, turning brown now, their seed pods emptying into the air. Above, the sky burned a deep pure

October blue. The trees had turned red, gold, brown. Their leaves littered the terrace, blown into piles in the corners.

Despite the sun's warmth, I shivered in the house's gloomy shadow. I pictured Miss Lilian creeping about in the dark rooms the way she used to, her mind racing with crazy thoughts, her heart full of hatred for Georgie and me.

A trickle of sweat ran down my spine. "Please come soon, Lissa," I whispered. "Please like me, please be my friend."

Chapter 7

At last, Lissa and MacDuff walked around the side of the house. I didn't move. I didn't speak. I sat on the lion bench, my skirt spread around me, my hands clasped in my lap, my back straight, and waited for them to see me. To be honest, I was scared. I had no idea what I looked like now. No mirrors, no one to ask but Georgie, who couldn't be trusted to give an honest answer. What if Lissa turned and ran at the sight of me?

MacDuff saw me before Lissa did. He tugged at his leash and barked. At that moment, I wanted nothing more than to flee to the safety of the woods, but I swallowed my fear and rose uneasily to my feet, as if I were a hostess greeting a guest.

With some effort, Lissa held MacDuff back. "Diana? Is that you?"

I smiled, pleased she didn't quite recognize me. I hoped I no longer looked like the monster who'd frightened her, "I washed," I said. "I changed my clothes. Like I said I would."

She came closer. When we were face to face, she smiled, and MacDuff sniffed the hand I held out to him. "Good dog," I whispered.

He tilted his head to the side and regarded me in a friendly way. His tail thumped once, a bit hesitantly.

"You look so different," Lissa blurted out. "Yesterday I thought—" She stopped and blushed. "You read my diary, so I guess you know what I thought."

"I didn't mean to scare you." I laughed, and after a second so did she. We were both nervous, edgy, unsure what to say or do.

When Lissa managed to stop laughing, she said, "You looked like a wild girl, a savage."

We laughed again, even harder. "Wait till you see my brother," I said through my giggles. "He won't take a bath, he won't let me wash or comb his hair, he won't even change his clothes."

"Your parents let him get away with that?" Lissa sounded surprised. "Don't they—"

“Oh, no. They—” I cut myself off. I couldn’t tell Lissa everything. Maybe I shouldn’t even have mentioned Georgie. “They don’t care,” I finished, but Lissa seemed to have lost interest in my parents.

She reached out to touch my braid. “Your hair is beautiful, so long and thick and blond—almost white.”

“It took forever to comb out the tangles.” I winced at the memory. “My scalp’s still sore.”

We sat down on the lion bench together. MacDuff lay down with his chin on Lissa’s clean white tennis shoes.

“I don’t have any shoes,” I told Lissa, suddenly conscious of my bare feet.

She looked surprised. “What do you do in the winter?”

“My feet are really tough.” I held up one foot so she could see the sole, as black and hard as if it were made of leather. “I don’t need shoes.”

Lissa stretched out her feet. “These are new. Maybe I could give you my old ones.” She put one foot next to mine. “We’re about the same size.”

We smiled at each other. That’s what friends did—shared with each other. My heart beat a little faster. Maybe Lissa liked me; maybe I could show her my favorite things—the spring that gushed out of a pile of mossy rocks and ferns, the heron’s nest in a dead tree in the marsh, the foxes’ den, the albino deer.

Just as I was about to suggest a walk, she leaned toward me, the smile gone from her face.

“Did you and your brother steal my bike and the other things?” she asked. “I won’t be mad. I just want them back.”

Shame heated my face. Maybe Lissa didn’t want to be my friend after all. Maybe she just wanted her bike and her book and her teddy bear.

“We didn’t steal your bike,” I told her. “We borrowed it one night to take a ride, that’s all, but Georgie crashed into a tree and wrecked it. We were scared to bring it back, so we hid it down in the woods.”

“It was brand-new,” Lissa said. “Dad gave it to me for my birthday. He can’t afford to buy another one.”

“I’m sorry.” I twisted my braid, tugging till my sore scalp hurt.

Lissa looked at me without smiling. “What about my book?” she asked. “And my bear?”

“I’m reading *Lassie* to Georgie,” I said. “He loves it. Can we keep it a little longer? We’re halfway through already.”

Lissa considered this. “I’ve read it five times, so I guess I can wait.” She looked at me, squinting in the sunlight. “It’s my favorite book.”

“It’s my favorite book, too. I’ve read it at least five myself.” I smiled at her, happy we had something in common. “It wasn’t stealing, you know. We borrowed it, like a library book. We were going to bring it back.”

Lissa gave me a half smile and said, “What about my bear?”

I pictured Georgie, sleeping happily with Alfie. How could I take the bear away from him? He’d be heartbroken.

“I know the bear’s special to you,” I said slowly, “but it’s special to Georgie, too. He used to have one just like it, but Miss—” I stopped myself just in time. “You have so many toys. Couldn’t Georgie keep it for a while?”

“You don’t understand. My mother gave it to me.” Lissa’s eyes filled with tears. “She died when I was only five. I can hardly remember her, but when I hold Tedward, it’s almost like she’s with me again.”

I touched her arm, full of sympathy for her and for Georgie as well. “Please, Lissa. Georgie will take good care of your bear.”

Lissa folded her arms across her chest and frowned at the woods. I looked at her, wishing I knew what to say or do. Making friends was harder than I remembered. Or maybe I was just out of practice.

“Where’s Georgie now?” Lissa asked suddenly.

I shrugged. “He’s probably fishing at the pond or holed up in a tree somewhere. Maybe he’s catching frogs in the marsh. He often disappears all day.”

Lissa looked at me curiously. “You seem to know a lot about the farm. Do you live near here?”

“Yes.” I folded my hands in my lap and watched a red leaf spin past my feet. It made a tiny scuttling sound on the terrace. I wished Lissa would stop asking questions. It was tiring.

“In those houses across the highway?”

“Yes.” The red leaf settled down in the corner with the other leaves. Two more followed it. Scuttle, scuttle across the terrace, like tiny footsteps.

“Do your parents know you come here after dark?”

I shook my head. “We sneak out.”

“You’re pretty good at sneaking,” Lissa said. “Out of your house. Into my house.” She was mad again, I could tell by her voice and the sharp look she gave me.

“I promise I won’t borrow anything else,” I said. “Unless I ask first.”

“How about Georgie?”

“I’ll make him promise, too.”

“You’d better.”

“I’m sorry, honest I am,” I told her. “But we’ve always taken stuff from the caretakers. They were lazy, mean old men, not like you and your father. You’re the first girl who’s ever come here. Please, Lissa, don’t be mad. I haven’t had a friend for a long, long time.”

Lissa hesitated. “I want my bear,” she said in a low voice, close to tears again. “Bring him back and we can be friends.”

Before I could answer, we were interrupted by a series of whoops and hollers from the woods. Georgie dashed up the hill toward us, his face and body painted with red and yellow mud from the creek. Crow and hawk feathers jutted from his hair. He wore nothing but a ragged loincloth.

“Go home,” he shouted at Lissa, “and don’t come near my sister again—or you’ll be sorry!”

Lissa gasped and dropped MacDuff’s leash. The dog raced across the lawn toward Georgie.

I ran after MacDuff, screaming at Lissa. “Call him off, call him off! That’s my brother!”

“MacDuff!” Lissa cried. “MacDuff!”

The dog had already caught Georgie and knocked him down. He stood over him, snarling. While Georgie lay on the ground and hollered, I grabbed MacDuff’s leash and tried to pull him away. In a second, Lissa was beside me, yelling at the dog, tugging at his collar.

At last, MacDuff allowed Lissa to haul him away from Georgie. I knelt beside my brother. “Are you all right?”

He sat up, looking more savage than ever. “You liar, I knew you’d sneak off and see her!”

Lissa stared at him, struggling to restrain MacDuff. The dog kept barking. The racket echoed from the house and the woods, setting off a flock of crows.

“Stop it, MacDuff!” Lissa shouted, adding to the din. “Be quiet! Sit!”

Georgie scrambled to his feet. “Shut up and go away!” he yelled at Lissa. “And make that stupid dog be quiet. She’s bound to hear the noise he’s making!”

“Who?” Lissa looked at Georgie. “Who will hear?”

I grabbed my brother and shook him. “Don’t say another word!”

He pulled loose. “I can say whatever I want. Thanks to you, the rules are busted. Nothing matters now.”

Lissa turned to me. “What’s he talking about?”

I stood between Lissa and Georgie, unsure whose side to take. I was furious with my brother for messing things up just when I was getting to know Lissa, but there he stood, ready to cry, though Lissa wouldn’t have guessed it from his fierce expression. Georgie had good reason to be angry. As he’d said, I was a liar. I’d broken promises. I’d broken rules. All because I wanted a friend.

Just as I was about to take Georgie’s hand and run, Lissa said, “Here comes my father.”

Horrified, I spun around and watched as Mr. Morrison strode toward us. It was one thing for Lissa to know about Georgie and me. She was just a kid like us. But Mr. Morrison was an adult. He was bound to ask even more questions than Lissa. And he’d be harder to fool.

“What’s going on?” Mr. Morrison asked, obviously puzzled by Georgie’s and my presence. “Who are these children?”

“Diana’s my friend and that’s her brother, Georgie,” Lissa said. “MacDuff tried to bite Georgie. He had him down on the ground. I could hardly pull him off.” Lissa started crying. “I was so scared.”

Mr. Morrison grabbed the dog’s collar and told him to sit and be quiet. MacDuff obeyed, but he watched my brother closely. He’d probably never seen a boy quite like Georgie.

Keeping a grip on MacDuff, Mr. Morrison asked my brother if he was all right. “Did MacDuff bite you? Or hurt you?”

Georgie’s thin chest rose and fell sharply with every quick and angry breath. Ignoring Mr. Morrison, he scowled at me. “You’ve really done it now, Diana!”

Before I could say a word to stop him, Georgie turned and ran. His skinny legs streaked through the weeds. The feathers in his hair bobbed. He didn’t look back, not even when I called his name. In a few seconds, he vanished into the woods. A crow cawed, and then all was still.

I longed to run after my brother, but I stood where I was, too shocked to move. After all these years, I’d let a caretaker catch me. I couldn’t believe it. Georgie was right. I’d really done it now.

Mr. Morrison stared at the vines and leaves still swaying from Georgie's plunge into the trees. "I wish he'd let me take a look at him. Are you sure the dog didn't bite him?"

"I'm positive," Lissa answered for me. "He knocked him down, that's all."

"He's okay," I added. "MacDuff just scared him."

Mr. Morrison glanced at MacDuff, who was now lying calmly at his feet. "That's not like you, old boy."

"Maybe it was the feathers in Georgie's hair," Lissa said, "and the war paint. He jumped out of the bushes screaming and yelling. I guess he was trying to frighten us."

Mr. Morrison shook his head. "I've never seen a getup like that. He looked like a genuine savage."

Lissa nodded. "I was scared to death of him."

Her father turned to me. "Well, I'm glad to see you don't wear feathers in your hair, too." He smiled to show he was teasing, but I didn't trust him. He'd start asking questions any minute now.

Sure enough, his very next words were, "Do you and Georgie live nearby?"

I shrugged and stared at my bare feet, cleaner than they'd been in years, almost unrecognizable. I seemed to have lost my voice as well as the ability to move.

Lissa reached out and took my hand. "Doesn't Diana have the most beautiful hair you ever saw?"

"Why, yes," he said. "With that long braid, you could be a princess in a fairy tale—Rapunzel perhaps."

"Come home with us." Lissa held my hand tighter. "We'll have something cold to drink. Soda, iced tea, lemonade—whatever you want."

Like a creature with no will of my own, I allowed Lissa to lead me back to the trailer. What was done was done. I might as well enjoy having a friend as long as possible.

Chapter 8

Mr. Morrison seated us at the picnic table and went inside to fix lemonade. I told him I wasn't thirsty, but he set a frosty glass down in front of me anyway.

"Where *do* you live, Diana?" he asked again in a friendly way.

"Oh, not very far." I stirred the lemonade with a straw. The ice cubes bumped against each other.

"In that group of houses across the highway from the farm gates?"

I glanced at Lissa and nodded. The ice cubes were miniature icebergs, the kind that sink ships in the Arctic Ocean. *Clinkety, clinkety, clunk.*

"Lissa's bike was stolen the night we moved in," Mr. Morrison went on. "A brand-new blue mountain bike, too expensive to replace, unfortunately. The police thought teenagers from your neighborhood might have taken it. Apparently theft is a problem on the farm."

"I don't know anything about that, sir." I made a special effort to remember my manners, but I didn't dare look at Lissa. What if she told her father who stole the bike?

"Georgie and I only play here in the daytime," I went on lying, praying Lissa would say nothing. "I know it's private property, but we love the woods."

Mr. Morrison shrugged. "As long as you don't go into the old house, it's fine with me."

Keeping my head down, I ran my finger over the initials Georgie had carved into the tabletop. "I'm not allowed to go in there," I said, telling the truth at last.

"That's good." Mr. Morrison paused to light his pipe. "It's not safe. The floors are in bad shape, and the cellar's full of snakes. Copperheads, someone told me."

"And it's haunted," Lissa put in. "The old lady who used to own it died in the house. I'd love to see her ghost. Wouldn't you?"

Mr. Morrison laughed, but I didn't see anything funny about Lissa's question. If Miss Lilian chose to show herself, I doubted my new friend

would enjoy the experience.

"Don't look so solemn, Diana," Mr. Morrison said. "Trust me, there's no ghost in that house. Snakes and spiders and mice. Squirrels. Bats. But no ghost—I guarantee it."

Lissa leaned toward her father. "One of those policemen thought—"

Mr. Morrison shook his head in exasperation. "Oh, for goodness sake, Lissa, only ignorant people believe in ghosts."

Lissa gave him a look I remembered giving my father from time to time. "You don't know everything, Dad."

If I'd dared, I'd have agreed with her. Mr. Morrison definitely didn't know everything. But neither did Lissa.

Mr. Morrison smiled and fidgeted with his pipe, which must be one reason people smoke—it gives them something to do while they think of what to say next.

Changing the subject completely, he turned his attention to me. "Why aren't you and your brother in school today?"

The question took me by surprise. For a moment, I was speechless. "We don't go—" I started to say, and then checked myself. "We're homeschooled. We finished early today."

"Just like me," Lissa said with a smile, not realizing that she herself had given me the idea. Before I'd heard her and Mr. Morrison talking about her lessons, I'd never known of such a thing.

Well, that launched a slew of questions from Mr. Morrison that I could answer only in the vaguest way. But he didn't seem to suspect anything. He smiled and puffed on his pipe, blowing a smoke ring or two to entertain us. We ended up talking about books we loved—*Oliver Twist* and *Treasure Island, Great Expectations* and *Kidnapped, Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, The Call of the Wild, The Jungle Books,* and, of course, *Lassie Come-Home.* I was the only one, however, who'd read *Clematis,* so I promised to lend it to Lissa—who'd never even heard of it.

"It must be an old book," Mr. Morrison said. "Probably out of print."

"Yes," I said. "It was written a long time ago, but it's a good story."

At last, Mr. Morrison went inside to work on his own book—a mystery, he said, which he hadn't quite solved.

Lissa and I remained at the picnic table, but MacDuff climbed the steps and pawed at the screen door. Mr. Morrison let him in. A few moments later, the computer keys began their soft *clickety-clack, clickety-clack.*

Lissa looked at me. “You haven’t drunk your lemonade.”

I pushed the glass away. “I told you I wasn’t thirsty. In fact, I don’t even like lemonade.”

“You should have told Dad. He would’ve brought you a soda instead.”

“I’m really not thirsty,” I repeated. I knew I should say something more, but what? I’d forgotten how to put words together in a clever way, to be funny, to be interesting. Worse yet, I had so many secrets. What if I said something that gave me away?

Fortunately Lissa was very talkative. In fact, the less I talked, the more she said. She told me about all the places she’d lived before coming to the old Willis place. Clearwater, Florida, had been her favorite—she’d swum every day and walked on the beach and collected seashells and pretty stones almost as clear as glass.

“Why do you move so much?” I asked her.

Her face suddenly serious, Lissa fidgeted with a splinter of wood jutting up from the table. “After Mom died,” she said slowly, “Dad quit his job and sold our house. He takes part-time jobs so he can write. We stay in a place just long enough for me to get used to it, and then he’s off again.”

Lissa sighed and rested her chin in her hands. “I wish we could live in a nice little house somewhere. I’d love to go to school like other kids. Make friends. Live a normal, ordinary life.”

“Me, too.” I spoke with more feeling than I’d meant to—or should have.

Lissa raised her head and looked at me sharply. “Why do you say that? You’re not stuck on the farm like me. Even if you’re homeschooled, you must have friends in your neighborhood.”

Instead of answering, I ran my finger around the initials I’d carved long ago on the picnic table. “D.A.E.”—Diana Alice Eldridge, right next to Georgie’s initials. Being stuck on the farm—my brother and I knew a lot more about that than Lissa did.

“I’m not allowed to be seen with other kids,” I told Lissa, rather pleased with the way I’d worded my answer. “I’m breaking the rules just sitting here with you.”

Lissa stared at me, clearly shocked. “Your parents don’t let you have friends?”

I lowered my head and went back to tracing my initials on the tabletop. Lissa must have thought I was very strange. A girl whose parents didn’t allow her to have friends—how peculiar, how bizarre, how weird.

Before I had time to think of an explanation, Lissa leaned toward me, her face solemn. “Do you belong to one of those weird religions? A cult? Is that why you can’t associate with other kids? Or go to public school? Or wear ordinary clothes?”

Even though I wasn’t sure what she meant, I nodded. Let her think what she liked about my parents—and their weird religion. As long as it stopped her from asking questions, I didn’t care.

“I bet they don’t let you watch TV or go to the movies.” Lissa leaned across the table, smiling sympathetically. “They probably don’t allow you to wear jeans, either. Or drink sugary stuff like lemonade.”

“The rules are very strict,” I said. “You and I will have to be secret friends—”

Lissa grabbed my hands and squeezed them tight. “Secret friends forever,” she whispered solemnly. “Your parents will never see me, never know about me. I promise.”

I let my hands stay in hers till she let them go. It was like being with Jane again, holding hands and sharing things. I wished I could tell Lissa everything about me. But I didn’t dare begin. How could I explain things *I* didn’t understand?

For a while neither of us spoke. That was nice, too, the quiet between us, disturbed only by birds singing. Overhead, the autumn breeze tugged more leaves from the trees and sent them spiraling slowly down around us, yellow and red, as quick as little fish gathering in pools.

After a while, Lissa smiled at me, cheerful again. “What’s your favorite color?”

“Blue, green, red—I don’t know. I love them all.”

“Mine’s purple.” She grinned. “How about your favorite food?”

“Mint chocolate chip ice cream.” No hesitation this time. My mouth watered at the memory of double-dip cones on hot summer afternoons, sticky and cold and sweet.

“Mine’s pizza with double cheese and meatballs.” Lissa asked a few more questions. Favorite book—*Lassie Come-Home* for both of us. Favorite candy—Hershey’s chocolate almond bars for both of us. Favorite baseball team—the Baltimore Orioles for her and the New York Yankees for me.

Lissa paused to think. “Who’s your favorite actor?”

Easy, I thought. “Roy Rogers. Georgie and I have seen just about every movie he’s ever made.”

Lissa stared at me as if I were crazy. “Roy Rogers isn’t a movie star. It’s a fast-food place.”

“Roy Rogers is so a movie star,” I said, puzzled by her ignorance. What kid didn’t love Roy Rogers? How could she confuse him with a fast-food place—whatever that was.

“His wife is Dale Evans,” I went on. “She’s in his movies, too. He rides a horse named Trigger, a beautiful golden palomino. This funny old guy, Gabby Hayes, is his sidekick. Sometimes he sings cowboy songs. Surely you’ve seen his movies. . . .”

I stopped, embarrassed by the expression on Lissa’s face. “Don’t you like Westerns?”

She made a face and shook her head. “They have too much shooting in them. Dad loves Clint Eastwood, though. *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly, Hang ’Em High, A Fistful of Dollars.* He watches them over and over again. But Clint Eastwood doesn’t sing cowboy songs.”

It was my turn to stare at Lissa. Who was Clint Eastwood? And just how many years had gone by since Georgie and I had watched Roy Rogers gallop across the desert, chasing cattle rustlers or claim jumpers? More years than I wanted to think about, certainly more than Lissa would believe. Georgie was right. I never should have gotten the two of us into this situation. What had I been thinking?

I looked toward the woods uneasily. It was late afternoon now, and the air had the chilly edge of fall. Georgie was probably hiding somewhere, too mad to go home. I hated for him to be away after dark. The shed was lonely at night.

“I’d better find my brother,” I told Lissa, anxious to leave before I said any more dumb things.

“Why was he so mad at you today?” she asked.

“He doesn’t want me to be friends with you,” I said. “Because—”

“I know, I know,” Lissa interrupted. “He’s scared your parents will find out and punish you.”

I ran my finger around my initials again. If only I were an ordinary girl like Lissa, uncomplicated, with no secrets.

Lissa jumped to her feet. “Let’s go find Georgie together,” she said. “I want to talk to him.”

I looked up, surprised by her sudden interest in my brother. “Why?”

Lissa shrugged. “Maybe if he gets to know me, he’ll like me, and then he won’t be mad anymore and we can all be friends.”

I wished things were as simple as Lissa thought. Reluctantly I led her down a deer trail into the woods, one of Georgie’s and my favorite paths. We saw three or four does and the albino stag flash through the trees ahead, sunlight dappling their flanks.

Lissa watched them vanish, delighted for even a glimpse. “It’s like magic here,” she said, “an enchanted forest where anything can happen.”

I looked around, trying to see the familiar woods as Lissa saw them. I’d been here so long I’d gotten used to the trees and the deer, the shadows and sunlight, the slow turn of the years from season to season.

I smiled. Lissa was certainly right about the farm and its woods and fields—anything could happen here.

Chapter 9

A few minutes later, Lissa grabbed my arm and pointed. “There he is—see him? In the field.”

At the sound of Lissa’s voice, Georgie turned and looked back at us. In his loincloth and war paint, his hair matted with burrs and feathers, he really did look like a wild creature, small and fierce among the towering goldenrod and thistles.

“Georgie,” I cried. “Georgie!”

Instead of answering, he ran toward the shelter of the trees.

“Come back!” I shouted. “Don’t run off!”

“Traitor!” he screamed over his shoulder. “Liar!”

With Lissa at my heels, I chased Georgie across the field and into the woods. He ducked and dodged under vines and around trees, flashing in and out of sunlight, his war paint blending into the woods like camouflage.

At last, I caught him and pinned him against a tree, holding him fast. “Will you please listen to me?” I shouted. “It’s okay to be friends with Lissa. She won’t tell anyone about us. She’s promised.”

“Your parents will never know you broke the rules,” Lissa added.

Georgie frowned at me, obviously puzzled. “Our parents? What do they __”

With my back to Lissa, I pressed one finger to my lips, warning him. “It’s okay. We can trust her. Honest.”

I felt Georgie’s body relax a little. His breathing slowly returned to normal. But he was still clearly upset. “Let me go,” he grumbled.

I stepped back and dropped my hands to my sides. He and Lissa studied each other silently for several moments, as if neither was sure what to make of the other.

Lissa spoke first, a little hesitantly. “I know you’re mad at Diana and me,” she said, “but can’t we be friends, Georgie?”

He scowled. “I don’t need friends. And neither does Diana. We have each other.”

“Don’t be rude.” My fingers ached to pinch him, but I knew that would only make him madder.

He gave me a nasty look and began stripping leaves from a spindly little bush. The feathers in his hair quivered. “If you want to be her friend,” he muttered, “go right ahead. Get in trouble. See if I care. But you can’t make me be friends with her.”

“He’s had a bad temper,” I told Lissa, “from the very day he was born.” I’d heard Mother laugh about Georgie’s rages, but I’d never found them particularly amusing. Now I was downright embarrassed. Foolish as it sounded, I’d actually hoped he’d like Lissa.

“She’s letting us keep *Lassie* till I finish reading it to you,” I told Georgie, thinking he might be pleased.

“I hate that book.” He yanked more leaves from the bush. “Give it back to her.”

“Georgie—”

He threw a shower of leaves at me. “She can have her ugly bear, too!”

Georgie finally made Lissa mad. “Fine!” she yelled. “Give me my things right now! If you don’t, I’ll tell my father who stole them.”

“See, Diana? I warned you not to trust her!” Georgie cried in triumph. “She’s a liar.”

Lissa backed away from us, her hand covering her mouth, as if she wanted to unsay what she’d just said. “I didn’t mean it. I won’t tell Dad. Honest.” She began to cry. “Just give me my bear. Please.”

“Georgie,” I said softly, “Lissa’s mother gave her the bear before she died. It’s very special to her.”

“Big crybaby. I said she can have it, didn’t I?” He turned and ran into the woods. “Wait right there. I’ll get her stuff.”

Lissa and I sat on a fallen tree and listened to Georgie crash off through the underbrush. A breeze sprang up and tugged more leaves from the trees. They pattered down around us like raindrops.

“I’m sorry.” Lissa wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “I was trying so hard to be nice. I thought he’d be nice, too, but when he wasn’t, I got mad.”

“It’s all right.” But I wasn’t sure it really was. What if something made Lissa mad again? Would she tell her father after all?

But how could I send her away? Lissa was my friend now. It was so nice to sit beside her with the leaves drifting down around us. There had to be a

way to make things right between her and my brother.

After a few minutes, Georgie returned, more quietly than he'd left. Nero stalked beside him, his head and tail high, as if he'd chosen sides.

"Oh," Lissa said, "it's Aladdin, the black cat MacDuff chased up the tree. Is he yours?"

"Yes," Georgie said. "And his name is Nero. Not Aladdin." With a scowl, he thrust the bear at Lissa. "Here. Now go away and leave us alone. Diana and I don't need you hanging around all the time."

Lissa cradled the bear in her arms. "He's dirty," she said. "You got him dirty."

Georgie shoved the book at her. "Take boring old *Lassie,* too." He turned to me. "Let's go, Diana."

"I'm walking Lissa home," I said. "You can come with us if you want."

He stared at me in disbelief. "You really are a traitor," he said coldly. "Something terrible is going to happen. Can't you feel it coming? And it will be your fault, Diana. Yours and hers."

"Don't be silly." Even as I tried to stare Georgie down, I remembered those sounds in the front parlor again, the little rustlings and whisperings behind the closed door. Despite myself, I shivered.

Lissa touched my arm. "What's he talking about?"

"Nothing," I said quickly. "He's just trying to scare me, that's all."

"Huh." Georgie strode away and Nero followed him, one as silent as the other.

"It'll be dark soon," I said to Lissa. "Your father will be looking for you."

I walked back to the trailer with her. Although the sun had barely set, light shone from the kitchen window, and I smelled food cooking. Mr. Morrison looked out and saw us. "Glad you're home," he called. "It's suppertime. How about staying and eating with us, Diana?"

"No, thank you. My parents are expecting me." I was grateful for the excuse Lissa had given me. Those strict parents of mine would never allow me to accept dinner invitations.

Before she went inside, Lissa said, "Meet me at the terrace tomorrow. I have lessons till noon, but after that I'm free."

It made me happy that Lissa wanted to see me, but I dreaded going to the terrace again. I'd risked it this afternoon and nothing had happened. But maybe I shouldn't take the chance again. "Why can't we just meet here?" I asked her.

“Oh, come on, Diana.” Lissa gave my braid a playful tug. “Your parents will never know you went near the house. I’ll see you there at two, okay?”

Without waiting for an answer, she ran up the steps. The door banged shut behind her, and MacDuff barked once, a kind of greeting. Without Lissa, the evening was empty, the dusk damp and cold.

I lingered in the shadows by the window and watched Lissa and her dad move around the kitchen, laughing and talking. I wished I were inside with them, helping set the table, joining in their conversation, sitting down with them in the lamplight. The aroma of tomato sauce drifted outside, rich with oregano and garlic. I breathed in deeply, almost tasting it. Most of the time I was happy not to have to bother with food, but tonight I hungered for a mouthful of pasta, steaming hot, drowned in sauce, dusted with Parmesan.

Sadly I turned my back on the steamy kitchen window and trudged across the field toward the woods. Crickets chirped in the weeds. Every night there were fewer of them. Winter was coming. We’d already had frost. Soon their voices would be silenced. It was a sad time of year.

A fox barked nearby—the vixen, I supposed—warning the kits I was coming. The albino deer leapt into the woods ahead of me, his antlered head high. The does followed, their necks extended, their tails white flags in the darkness.

By the time I reached the shed, Georgie was already asleep, burrowed deep under his blankets, Nero beside him. All I could see of my brother were the feathers stuck in his hair.

I took off my clean clothes and folded them neatly, something I hadn’t done for years. I pulled one of Miss Lilian’s flannel nightgowns over my head and slid quietly under the covers.

I was tempted to wake Georgie and try to explain about Lissa and me, but I doubted it would help. My brother swung between moods like a man on a trapeze—now up, now down; now here, now there. Whether I apologized or not, he’d get over his anger. He always did.

This time, it might take a little longer than usual. I’d never betrayed him before.

Hours passed. Georgie slept deeply, undisturbed by bad dreams, in no need of comforting. I lay beside him, plagued with worries and doubts. Maybe Lissa was awake, too. I pictured her in bed, reading *Lassie Come-Home,* her little bear tucked in safely beside her, so cozy, so comfortable in

her room. She had no idea how fragile everything was. How easily it vanished just when you thought it was yours forever.

I cried then. Cried for my old life, my parents, our warm, snug house. Cried for Georgie, sleeping beside me with feathers in his hair, growing wilder every year.

The Diary of Lissa Morrison

Dear Dee Dee,

Today I met Diana, the girl who scared me so badly yesterday. And guess what?? She's not a monster after all.

Here's how I found out. She came to my room last night and stole (or, as she says, "borrowed") this diary. She read what I'd written to you about her and it hurt her feelings. Well, that's the risk you take when you snoop into someone else's private thoughts. But it turned out for the best. She cleaned herself up and wrote a note in my diary—would I meet her on the terrace of the old house? I was kind of scared so I took MacDuff, and there she was, waiting on the lion bench like a princess.

Since she's promised never to read another word I write to you, Dee Dee, I will tell you what I think of Diana—and hope she keeps her word and doesn't "borrow" my diary again. She's pretty, but her clothes are strange and old-fashioned, and she has no shoes. Not one pair!!! She says she doesn't need them—not even in the winter—because her feet are tough.

Her hair is so blond it's silvery white, and she wears it in a long, thick braid hanging down below her waist. Dad told her she reminded him of Rapunzel. For once, he's exactly right. Diana's just the sort of girl you might read about in a book written a long time ago—a princess under a spell, maybe. All she needs is a garland of flowers in her hair.

It's as if she's not living in the same world as most people. You have to call her back sometimes, otherwise she'll drift away into the woods and disappear. Do you know what I mean, Dee Dee? It's so hard to put things in words.

It's not just her looks that make her different from anyone I know. It's also the things she says. For example, Roy Rogers is her favorite

movie star. All I know about him is the fast-food chain. At dinner, I asked Dad if he ever heard of Roy Rogers the movie star. Dad said he was famous from way back when—not in his time but his parents' time. His mom, my grandmother, had an autographed picture of Roy and Trigger she'd kept since she was a little girl. It wasn't autographed by Roy himself, Dad said, but by someone else, maybe his secretary. Wouldn't that be a fun job—signing movie stars' pictures!

But how would Diana know about those old western movies, I asked. Dad said well, if her parents are as strict as she says, maybe they don't let her and Georgie watch new movies. Maybe they have lots of videos of old Westerns. The kind with no cussing or sex or violence. Just Roy Rogers singing and chasing bad guys wearing black hats.

Dad thinks Diana's sweet and pretty and shy, a very nice girl, but, like me, he doesn't especially care for her brother, Georgie—way too sassy, with those feathers stuck in his hair, and smeared all over with clay like war paint (I'll tell you more about him later).

Dad got on my nerves when he started asking questions about Diana and Georgie's parents. He was so nosy. What do they do for a living? Why do they homeschool their kids? How come they allow them to play on the farm? Don't they worry about them? and so on.

I said I don't know much about Diana's parents, except that they're very strict. I didn't mention the religious cult. He'd probably ask Diana about it, and she'd know I'd talked to him about her

Now for more about Georgie. He gave me back my book and my bear (poor Tedward—I had to wash him and brush him to make him pretty again), but he was very nasty about it. You'd think I was the one who'd stolen them from him.

My bike is wrecked, though. They hid it in the woods. I doubt I'll ever see it again, which makes me mad. It was a really good bike.

Tomorrow Diana and I are meeting at the old house. She didn't want to because her parents don't allow her to play there. I'm not supposed to go there, either, but I know Dad won't punish me if I do.

Diana says she'd never go in the old house, but that's all I think about. I want to know what it's like inside. Maybe because it's so big

and dark and empty. A presence, you could say. Like a haunted house in a story.

As a matter of fact, I'm looking at the old Willis place right now. I can see it from my window. The moon is shining down on it bright as day. I'm sure Miss Willis is in there, roaming around from room to room. Sometimes I think she knows I'm here, and she's waiting for me to pay her a visit. She wants me to come, Dee Dee. I can almost hear her calling me.

Oh, I'm giving myself goose bumps! Maybe Dad's right about my imagination. I'm so silly. What will I dream up next?

If you promise not to tell anyone, Dee Dee, I'll let you in on my secret plan. Dad's going to Home Depot tomorrow to buy stuff to fix the plumbing and maybe some paint, nothing interesting. He loves hardware stores and he always spends hours looking at stuff. He'll be gone a long time. I know where he keeps the key to the house. Guess what I plan to do while Dad's out???

Now I'm going to sleep, dear Dee Dee, and so are you. Good night!

Love, Lissa—
I'll tell you all about the house tomorrow night!

Chapter 10

When I woke, Georgie was gone and so was Nero. I went to the door to see if either was nearby. It was a dull gray day, the sort that tempts you to sleep the morning away. Thick, heavy clouds threatened rain. Leaves blown by a cold autumn wind sailed across the sky, baring trees in the woods. Three deer grazed in the field, a doe and two fawns. Though I made no sound, the mother turned her head toward me. Silently passing a warning to her fawns, she led them into the woods. Of my brother and the cat I saw no sign.

Without Georgie, there was nothing to do but read *Clematis* again. I turned the pages slowly to make the story last, but my thoughts kept straying to my brother. Where was he? Why didn't he come back? He'd been mad at me before, but he'd never stayed away this long.

What if he'd found a place to hide from me? Suppose he refused to forgive me? Suppose he didn't return?

No. That was ridiculous. Georgie couldn't live without me any more than I could live without him. We'd been together too long, bound by secrets we could never share with anyone else. Not even Lissa. Especially not Lissa.

He'd come back soon. At any moment, I'd hear him running through the fallen leaves, calling my name. He wouldn't be mad. He wouldn't care about Lissa. Maybe he'd say he'd changed his mind and we could be friends—all three of us.

But no matter how hard I listened for his footsteps, Georgie didn't appear.

The morning slid past, each hour slower and emptier than the one before. I told myself I wouldn't leave till Georgie came home, I wouldn't meet Lissa, but in the end I couldn't stand the loneliness any longer.

Still hoping to see Georgie somewhere, I followed the path through the woods to Miss Lilian's house. Fallen leaves were ankle deep on the ground. I kicked through them the way I did each fall, watching them fly up in swirls of yellow and red, breathing in their mellow smell.

Sometimes I thought Georgie was following me, spying on me from a hiding place in the woods, but he didn't give himself away. Once or twice I

stopped, shivery with goose bumps, and called his name, but he didn't jump out from behind a tree or a bush as I expected. Maybe it was a teenager from the houses across the highway, trying to scare me. That would have been a twist. I didn't dare imagine who else it might be.

At the rear of the old house, I hesitated. Above my head, the trees sighed and murmured. Branches creaked and rubbed against each other.

Without sunlight, the house's pink brick lost its color and faded to an ashy gray. A loose shutter on the second floor banged against the side. The plastic sheeting on the roof rose here and there, tugged by the wind.

The shivery feeling came back, stronger than before. I wished Georgie would step out of the woods and stop me from walking across the field to the terrace. I waited a little longer, giving him a chance to talk me into going home, but he didn't appear.

On the terrace, Lissa waited, dressed for the weather in a thick red sweatshirt and blue jeans. MacDuff loped about on the lawn, following his nose as if he were searching for something. Part of me said, *Go home, hide, don't go near the house,* but a stronger part said, *You've been lonely so long, you deserve a friend.*

If Georgie had been in the shed when I woke up, if I'd met him in the woods, if we'd made up, I might not have left the shelter of the woods. But Lissa was sitting on the lion bench, her head down, looking as lonesome as I felt.

MacDuff saw me before Lissa did. He ran toward me, barking and wagging his tail. I held out my hand for him to sniff and he let me pet him.

"I was afraid you weren't coming." Lissa hugged herself against the wind. "Aren't you cold?"

I glanced down at my skirt and blouse and bare feet and shook my head. I was never really cold, never really hot. Never hungry, never thirsty. But I couldn't very well tell Lissa that without starting another round of questions. I shrugged, as if to say a little wind wouldn't hurt me.

"I can lend you a sweater," she offered. "Or a jacket."

"Thanks, but I'll be okay. I'm used to the cold."

"You are so mysterious, Diana." Lissa looked into my eyes, hungry to learn more about me.

I shrugged again, afraid to tell her anything that might give my secrets away.

Fortunately Lissa never stuck to one subject long. “Where’s Georgie today?” she asked.

“He went off somewhere before I got up. He’s still mad at me.”

“I’m glad I don’t have a brother.” Lissa sighed. “A sister might be nice, though.”

“Oh, Georgie’s not so bad.”

Lissa raised her eyebrows at that. “Why does he hate me so much?”

“I told you, he doesn’t hate you. He’s just scared of breaking the rules and being punished.”

“What would your parents do to him?” Lissa stared at me. “If they beat him or anything like that, they could be arrested for child abuse.”

No matter what I said, Lissa came up with questions I couldn’t answer. In an effort to avoid her probing eyes, I looked across the lawn toward the woods, still hoping for a glimpse of Georgie. The wind was blowing harder, whipping the treetops back and forth. Eddies of dead leaves swirled toward us, spiraling up like phantoms from the corners of the terrace.

“A storm’s coming,” I said. “Maybe we should go to your place. Your dad will be worried.”

Lissa pulled the hood of her sweatshirt over her head and drew the drawstring tight under her chin. “Oh, don’t worry about Dad. He’s at Home Depot, the most boring store in the world. It’s jam-packed with tools and plumbing fixtures and nails and screws and I don’t know what all. He’ll be there for hours.”

“But look at the sky.” I studied the clouds’ dark shapes—flocks of lost sheep straying across a desolate wasteland, blown to rags and tatters by the wind. “It will rain soon.”

“Just wait till you see what I have.” Lissa reached into the pocket of her jeans and pulled out a rusty key. A small tag hung from it. “I took this from Dad’s key ring. Guess what it’s for?”

I shrank back, my heart racing like a wild thing. It was a big, old-fashioned house key, maybe one that my father had carried on *his* key ring.

Lissa leaned close to me, her eyes gleaming. “It opens the back door. We can go inside.”

On the other side of the brick wall I sensed Miss Lilian listening, her head up, like a hound on the scent of something.

“I think we should leave,” I said. “Now. Before it’s too late.”

Lissa ignored me. “The old woman who used to live here died in the parlor,” she went on. “Dad told me nobody found her body for a week. Isn’t that gross?”

“Lissa.” I tugged at her arm. “Let’s go.”

Dropping her voice to a whisper, Lissa pulled me closer. “She never left the house, not even to buy groceries. Her hired man did the shopping for her, but she wouldn’t let him in the house. No one was allowed in there. It was filthy, Dad said—cats peeing anywhere they liked, her garbage piled up everywhere, cockroaches, mice, even rats. She was crazy.”

“I’ve heard that.” I worked to keep my face blank, my voice expressionless. My own mother had said the same often enough, but she’d never been able to convince my father. Eccentric, he’d argued, but harmless. He should have listened to Mother. She knew Miss Lilian far better than he did.

Lissa waved the key. “You and I could go inside and see the very room she died in. Right now.”

“Your father told us not to,” I said. “It isn’t safe.”

“Dad isn’t here,” Lissa reminded me. “He won’t know.”

Rain began falling, softly at first, speckling my blouse and skirt with wet spots.

“Come on, Diana.” Lissa got to her feet and tugged at my hand. “We’ll get drenched out here.”

“It’s dark inside. You won’t be able to see a thing.” I didn’t want to go into that house again, no matter how hard it rained. Where was Georgie? If he were here, he’d pull me away.

“I already thought of that.” Lissa pulled a small flashlight out of her pocket and brandished it.

“We could fall through the floor and end up in the cellar—with the snakes.”

“You’re afraid!” Lissa laughed. “You think it’s haunted, don’t you? You’re scared of Miss Willis!”

I wanted to cover her mouth to keep her from saying that name. “It’s against the rules, Lissa,” I blurted out. “I can’t go in there! You mustn’t go in either! You don’t understand—”

“Your parents won’t know you broke their silly rules,” Lissa cut in.

Before I could stop her, she ran to the door and stuck the key in the lock. With a great deal of effort, she managed to turn it. It made a loud rasping

sound. Shoving with her shoulder, she forced the door open.The hinges screeched in protest.

From where I stood, I felt cold dead air rush out to meet me. It smelled of cat pee, garbage, mold, mildew, all the stale odors that had been locked in the house with Miss Lilian.

MacDuff stuck his nose inside. When he caught the whiff of rot and decay, his hackles rose and he whined.

Lissa watched the dog back away from the door. “MacDuff,” she said, “you silly thing. What’s the matter with you?

Listen to him, I thought, he’s smarter than you are. Of course, I didn’t say it out loud. No matter how much trouble Lissa caused, I wanted to please her, to keep her as a friend.

MacDuff cocked his head and barked. “Come away, come away,” he seemed to say.

Ignoring the dog, Lissa turned to me. “Come on,” she urged. “We’ll freeze to death out here.”

Afraid to let her go by herself, I followed her through the door. MacDuff stayed where he was, but he continued to bark.

With the back door open, the house wasn’t as dark as I’d expected. Lissa barely needed the flashlight. But she flicked it on anyway, playing the beam over the ruins of the kitchen. Someone had pulled the stove away from the wall to disconnect the gas line. The top was caked with burned grease, and the oven door hung open. The refrigerator door was gone, its interior stained and streaked. Bottles and jars filled the sink.

I was glad Mother wasn’t here to see the state of things. In the old days, the kitchen had been her territory. She’d kept it gleaming and filled with good smells. Where spiders now spun their webs, geraniums had bloomed red and pink on the windowsills.

While I stayed in the doorway, fidgeting and fretting, Lissa explored the kitchen. Undeterred by cobwebs and filth and the rustle of mice burrowing into hiding places, she opened cupboards and investigated rusted cans of food, chipped china, dented pots and pans, empty bottles and jars.

“Look at this,” she said loudly. “Miss Willis must have saved every jar of wheat germ she ever bought. I bet there’s a hundred of them.”

Miss Willis, Miss Willis—the words hung in the still air like a call. “Wake up, Miss Willis, you have visitors.”

“Let’s go,” I begged Lissa, sure I’d heard sounds from deep in the house. “Something’s in here. Don’t you hear it?”

“Mice,” she said, cocking her head to listen. “Squirrels maybe.”

I grabbed her arm, but she pulled away, as stubborn as Georgie. “I’m not leaving till I see the rest of the house.”

Before I could stop her, Lissa pushed open the kitchen door and ran out into the hall. She stopped at the back stairs, the servants’ stairs, the ones my mother used after Mrs. Willis died and Miss Lilian took over.

Lissa pointed the flashlight up into the darkness. “What’s that at the top of the steps?”

In the dim light I made out the seat Miss Lilian had installed when she’d gotten too old to climb to the second floor. She sat on it, pushed a button, and it glided up and down the stairs. Before Miss Lilian died, Georgie and I played on it whenever we had a chance, zooming up and down as fast as we could. Miss Lilian would hear the noise and hobble down the hall. If she’d left the seat at the bottom of the stairs, she’d find it at the top. If she’d left it at the top, she’d find it at the bottom.

Georgie and I were too fast for her to catch us in the act, but she knew who was responsible. She’d call our names sometimes. And curse us. We never answered, but she must have heard us laughing. It was such fun to tease the old woman. Didn’t she deserve it?

Back then, she couldn’t do anything worse to us than she’d already done. But now? I wasn’t so sure.

“It’s a seat to help handicapped or old people go up and down the stairs,” I told Lissa. I was proud of my steady voice, but I hid my shaking hands behind my back.

“Do you think it still works?”

“There’s no electricity in the house,” I said. “The county turned it off after she died.”

Lissa drew in her breath and crossed her arms across her chest as if she were cold. “That seat looks creepy up there. Like it’s waiting for Miss Willis.”

“The whole place is creepy.” I tugged her arm. “Let’s go.”

Lissa pulled away. “Not yet, Diana. I want to see what’s upstairs.”

“Those steps will collapse before you’re halfway to the top.” I tugged her arm again, and again she shook me off.

“There must be another staircase.” Lissa pushed past me and headed down the hall toward the front of the house. From an uncovered window high overhead, a little daylight made its way down the curved staircase, illuminating thousands of dust motes dancing in the dim air.

Once more, I saw Miss Lilian sweeping down those stairs, head high, scorning Mother as she passed her, glaring at Georgie and me. How cold her voice, how haughty her manner, how hateful the look on her face. “Go outside, girl. I can’t bear the sight of you.”

It was rain I heard now, not Miss Lilian’s voice. Rain beating against the boarded windows, splashing through holes in the roof, streaking the walls. Rain. And wind creeping through cracks, rattling and banging loose boards and shutters.

But there was something else—little sounds from behind the closed parlor door. Murmurs and sighs, shuffling noises, the tinkle of something small breaking. She was there all right, trapped in that room. As long as no one opened the door, maybe, just maybe . . .

I hesitated, torn between running outside and staying with Lissa, who was already at the top of the steps. “Come on, Diana,” she called. I followed her, looking over my shoulder at the parlor door, terrified I’d see it slowly open.

Lissa went straight to Miss Lilian’s bedroom, almost as if she’d been guided there. “Look at all this, Diana!” She pointed to the faded velvet drapes hanging at the windows, the cob webbed chandelier, the fancy marble fireplace, the high-topped walnut bed, the dusty matching furniture.

Yanking open a closet door, Lissa peered inside. “Her clothes are still here.” She pawed through Miss Lilian’s silk dresses, her velvet gowns, her wool coats, setting them swinging and swaying like ghosts.

While I watched, horrified, she held them up to herself and danced around the room, admiring her reflection in the tarnished mirrors. She tried on hats with plumes, straw hats, knit caps, even a cowboy hat from Miss Lilian’s riding days. She wrapped shawls around her shoulders, draped herself with scarves, and struck silly poses like a model in a fashion magazine.

“Here, try this one, Diana.” Lissa held up a blue beaded dress, one of Miss Lilian’s favorites. The last time she’d worn it, she’d slapped me for spilling a tray of drinks she’d given me to serve the guests.

I pushed the dress aside, hating the dusty feel of the fabric. The smell of Miss Lilian's perfume still clung to it.

Lissa shrugged and grabbed a large straw hat covered with artificial flowers, another of Miss Lilian's favorites. She struck a silly pose. "Isn't this the most hideous hat you ever saw?

"Please, Lissa," I begged, "put those things away. Your father will see the mess and know someone's been in here."

Reluctantly Lissa began picking up the clothing, but she insisted on wearing the flowered hat. In hope of getting her out of the house, I helped jam dresses and shoes, skirts and blouses, coats and jackets back into the closet. Despite the noise we were making, I heard other sounds from the floor below.

"Listen," I whispered to Lissa. "Do you hear that?"

She stopped chattering, her face solemn for a moment. "What?"

"A sort of rustling and whispering, floors creaking."

Lissa stayed silent, listening hard, and then shook her head. "It's just old house sounds."

After I persuaded her to leave Miss Lilian's room, Lissa looked in the other bedrooms, empty except for odds and ends of broken furniture, mildewed books, and faded pictures, things Miss Lilian had left behind, needed no longer.

"Is this her, do you think?" Lissa held up a framed photograph of Miss Lilian sitting on the lion bench, frowning at the camera, eyes squinted against the sun, a cigarette in one hand and a glass in the other. "She looks like a witch, doesn't she?"

Taken by surprise, I backed away from the picture. How often had I seen Miss Lilian sitting on that bench, smoking, drinking a glass of wine, her mouth drawn down with disapproval? I even recognized her dress—navy with a prim white collar and cuffs, buttoned tightly. In those days, she'd always dressed for dinner.

"She *was* a witch." I spoke without thinking, but Lissa saw nothing out of the ordinary in my words.

"That's what everyone says." Lissa pitched the photo into the corner. I heard the glass break. "Old witch," she said with a giggle.

"Can we go now?" I started toward the stairs, frightened by Lissa's recklessness. I had to get her out of the house before she did any more damage.

But Lissa was obstinate. Grabbing my arm to stop me from leaving, she shined her flashlight up a dark flight of steps leading to the third floor. "Don't you want to see what's up there?"

"No." I pulled away from her.

"Diana, don't be such a scaredy-cat!" Lissa caught my arm again and tugged me toward the dark staircase. "I might never get another chance to explore this place."

At the top, Lissa drew in her breath at the sight of the grand piano. Without a second's hesitation, she ran to it and lifted the lid. It creaked so loudly I jumped.

"Can you play?" she asked me.

"Don't touch that," I whispered. "Please, Lissa."

"Why not? Who'll hear? Who'll care?" Brushing me aside, she set her flashlight down and struck the yellowed keys. The sound was discordant, warped, tuneless, but she banged away, trying to play "Chopsticks."

"Stop!" In a panic, I grabbed her and yanked her away from Miss Lilian's precious Steinway. "No one's allowed to touch the piano!"

For a moment we struggled. Lissa obviously didn't like being told what to do. Finally, she broke away from me and picked up the hat she'd lost in our tussle. Setting it firmly on her head, she deliberately pounded the piano keys, producing a hideous, tuneless sound.

I wanted to slap her, but as I raised my hand I remembered Miss Lilian's palm striking my cheek, the flash of pain. I shrank back from Lissa, fearful of who I might become, of what I might do. "It's against the rules!"

"The rules, the rules, the stupid rules. Everything's against the rules. How can you have any fun when you're always worried about breaking rules?"

"You don't understand," I said. "If Georgie or I—" I burst into tears, too frightened of Miss Lilian to go on.

Lissa's mood shifted. Abandoning the piano, she gave me a quick hug. "Oh, Diana, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. I just wanted to explore the house. It's almost as if, as if . . ." She paused and adjusted the hat's angle.

"As if what?" There was something she wasn't telling me, something that worried me. I shivered, intensely aware of the darkness around us.

Lissa tilted the hat over one eye and then shifted it the other way. Nervous. Unsure. "I don't know," she said slowly. "I just had to see the house. I *had* to."

Over our heads, thunder rumbled. The heavy drapes swayed as the wind found its way through the boards covering the windows. Downstairs something thumped softly. I heard it again and then again, a little louder each time.

"Please, Lissa," I begged. "Let's go. Before it's too late."

She stared at me. "Too late for what?"

"Your father," I blurted, thinking fast. "He'll come home and you won't be there and he'll start looking for you. If he finds us in here . . ." I let my words trail away, unsure what to say next. "Well, you'll be in trouble for sure. And so will I."

Lissa shrugged. "Dad isn't strict like your parents. We'll just have a little talk and that'll be that." She shined the flashlight around the room again, letting its light play on old paintings, books, an ornate carved marble fireplace. "I guess I've seen just about everything up here," she said at last.

Aiming the light in front of us, Lissa followed me downstairs. On the second floor, she paused and looked at Miss Lilian's bedroom. "Are you sure you've never seen her ghost?" she asked.

My mouth was too dry to answer, so I simply shook my head and tugged her sleeve, urging her not to linger.

Suddenly, Lissa rushed past me, her feet thudding on the stairs. She bumped the old photographs hanging crooked on the walls, brushed the strips of torn paper aside, and came to a stop at the bottom.

Turning to me, she said, "Dare me to open the parlor door?"

Chapter 11

I ran down the steps after Lissa. In a panic, I jerked her hand away from the knob. “Don’t open that door!”

“I want to see where she died.” Lissa reached for the knob again. Miss Lilian’s hat hid her face, but her voice was shrill with excitement. The rustling sounds grew louder, as if someone in a silk dress was crossing the room. The floor creaked, and the air turned so cold my teeth chattered.

As clearly as if she was standing beside me, I heard Miss Lilian’s voice in my ear. “Get out of the girl’s way, Diana. Let her open the door.”

Instead of obeying the old woman, I pressed my back against the door and pushed Lissa away with all my strength. She staggered backward and crashed against the wall.

“What’s wrong with you?” Lissa rubbed her arm and winced as if I’d hurt her. “Are you nuts?”

“Just stay away from the door. If you open it, she’ll get out!”

“What are you talking about? Who’ll get out?”

In my ear, Miss Lilian’s cold voice froze the very air between us. “Let the girl open the door. You and I have business to settle, miss.”

“Please, Lissa, please!” I flung myself at her. “I beg you, we have to get out of here.”

But Lissa evaded me and reached for the knob. “I have to open the door,” she cried. “I have to!”

“That’s right,” Miss Lilian hissed, “she must open the door. She must, she must.”

Despite my efforts, Lissa managed to turn the knob. The door swung open and slammed against the wall with a loud bang. Out poured a blast of cold air. It spun past us like a small cyclone of ice, taking the flowered hat with it, and whirled up the stairs, leaving us frozen speechless in the parlor doorway.

Suddenly, there she was, Miss Lilian herself, peering down at Lissa and me from the top of the stairs. She was just as I remembered—tall and gaunt, bent with arthritis, wrathful, hateful. Uncombed hair framed her pale face in

thorny white brambles. Clutching her hat, she leaned over the railing and directed her gaze at me. “You! You!”

She stood there, her mouth moving as if she wanted to say more but could find no words. “You,” she whispered. “You and your brother. Just wait!”

With a wail of fury, she turned and fled. Her gray silk dress rustled. Her footsteps clicked the way they always had. Then her bedroom door slammed shut, and she was gone.

In the sudden silence, I collapsed on the steps, weak with fear. Miss Lilian was free. Free to pursue Georgie and me, free to hurt us again and again. With her hunting us, we weren’t safe anywhere on the farm. And we couldn’t leave.

I glanced at Lissa. What had she done? I wanted to scream at her, to blame everything on her, but she sagged against the wall as if she’d never move again, her face colorless, her eyes unfocused. While I watched, she drew in her breath, opened her mouth, and began to scream.

Out of pity, I took Lissa’s hand and pulled her to her feet. I ran and dragged her behind me, still screaming, stumbling and tripping and bumping into things as if she were blind.

“Faster!” I yelled, jerking her along. I didn’t care if I was hurting her, I didn’t care if I was scaring her. It was her fault. She’d brought me here, she’d insisted on seeing every room in the house, she’d opened the parlor door.

At last, we plunged outside into cold, fresh air smelling of nothing but rain. MacDuff leapt up from the terrace and bounded ahead across the weedy lawn, as anxious as we were to get away from the house.

Once safe in the trailer, we slammed the door against the wind and rain and whatever else might be out there. Without speaking, we huddled on the sofa, wet and cold and shaking. MacDuff cowered between us, as scared as we were. Mr. Morrison wasn’t back from Home Depot—which was a good thing, considering Lissa’s hysterical weeping.

“Oh, Diana,” she cried, “I saw her, I saw Miss Willis! She ran up the stairs, she, she—” Lissa’s sobs overcame her and she buried her face in MacDuff’s fur.

“Why didn’t you listen to me?” I tried hard not to shout at her, but my voice rose anyway. “I told you not to go in the house, I told you not to open that door!”

Lissa rocked back and forth, crying and moaning. “I couldn’t help it, my hand just went to the doorknob. I couldn’t stop myself. And she got out. She —”

“She didn’t just *get* out. You *let* her out!”

“But I didn’t mean to. I told you. It was like my hand, my hand—” Lissa raised her head from MacDuff’s back and looked at her hand as if it didn’t belong to her. “She made me do it, Diana.”

I stared at her. Maybe it was true. Ghosts sometimes possessed people. I’d seen it happen in movies, so maybe it happened in real life, too. “If you’d just listened to me—”

Lissa started crying again. “It wasn’t my fault.”

I slumped down on the sofa and stared at the window, sheeted with rain. MacDuff whimpered and licked my hand, and I stroked his head. Though I didn’t like to admit it, I’d started all this by making friends with Lissa. It wasn’t her fault. It was mine. I had no right to be angry with her.

Lissa leaned closer to me, her voice hoarse from crying, and whispered, “What will Miss Willis do? Will she hurt us?”

I kept looking at that window, fearful of seeing a face press itself against the glass. I saw nothing but rain. Where was Miss Lilian? What was she doing all alone in her ruined house? When would she come looking for my brother and me?

“If she comes after anyone,” I said slowly, “it will be Georgie and me, not you. It’s us she hates.”

Lissa huddled in her corner of the sofa and stared at me, her face wet with tears. “Why would she hate you and Georgie?”

I looked at Lissa long and hard, tired of her questions, tired of her ignorance. Why had I wanted a friend so badly? I got to my feet. “I have to find Georgie.”

“Don’t go.” Lissa grabbed my hand with both of hers. “Wait till Daddy comes home. Don’t leave me here alone.”

“I told you, Miss Willis won’t hurt you.”

“Please, please!” Lissa clung to me and wept. “Stay with me. I’m scared.”

I pulled away from her. “You have MacDuff. But Georgie’s out there in the woods with no one but Nero.”

“Don’t be mad,” Lissa begged. “I’m sorry, Diana, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know—I didn’t mean—I—”

I left her weeping on the couch, her arms around the dog. All I cared about was Georgie. I was his big sister. I had to keep him safe from Miss Lilian.

The Diary of Lissa Morrison

Dear Dee Dee,

What happened today is almost too terrible to write about. My hand is still shaking so much I can hardly hold my pen. I did what I said I was going to do. I made Diana go inside the house with me. MacDuff wouldn't come with us. Diana didn't want to go in either—she said it was against the rules.

Oh, Dee Dee, I should have listened to Diana. She and MacDuff are both smarter than I am. What's wrong with me? Why do I do dumb things?

As soon as I stepped inside that house, I smelled a horrible stink—cat pee mostly, just disgusting—but did that stop me? Oh, no, I went in anyway. I just had to see what the house was like.

But it was more than that, Dee Dee. It was like something was making me go inside. It was kind of like a voice in my head saying, "Come in, come in." It wasn't just an invitation, Dee Dee, it was more like an order, and I had to do what it said. Hearing voices—it sounds crazy, but that's what it was like.

I hope nobody ever reads what I just wrote. They'd lock me up in a padded cell for sure. But it's true. There was a voice, and now I know it was Miss Willis. She wanted me to come in, she wanted me to open that door.

I was scared, but I didn't want Diana to know, so I said let's go upstairs. We went to Miss Willis's bedroom and I tried on her clothes and made fun of them. I even took one of her hats, a big one with flowers on it, really hideous, and then I made Diana go to the third floor. There was a big old piano up there, all covered with cobwebs. Diana freaked out when I started playing it. We actually had a fight, and then she started crying and I realized I was acting like a spoiled brat, making her do what I wanted when she was so totally worried about those rules—which turned out to be much more important than I ever dreamed.

So I told her I was sorry and we started to leave, but at the bottom of the steps the voice in my head started up again. There I was, right in front of the parlor door, and I knew that was the room where she died, and the voice kept telling me to open the door.

So I grabbed the knob. Diana tried to stop me, but it was like something had ahold of me and it was making me turn the knob and open the door. Honest. I'm not just making excuses for what I did. It was her. Miss Willis. I'm sure of it now.

As soon as the door opened, this icy cold wind came rushing out and I saw something gray go running up the steps. It took the hat, snatched it right off my head, and stopped at the top. Dee Dee, don't think I'm nuts when I tell you this—it was Miss Willis. She looked real, but I knew she was a ghost because she died at least ten years ago. There she was, staring down at Diana and me, mean and ugly with wild white hair, wearing a gray dress like any old crazy woman you might see in a store or walking down the street.

She leaned over the rail and started yelling at Diana. Then she ran down the hall and I heard her bedroom door slam and the house got very, very quiet—as if it was holding its breath till the next thing happened.

That's when I started screaming. I couldn't stop. Maybe I was hysterical. Or losing my mind. Diana grabbed me and yanked me along behind her. She kept saying I had to go faster, but my legs wouldn't work right and I couldn't see, maybe my eyes were shut, I don't know, but I was so scared. We got outside and ran all the way home and MacDuff ran with us. I thought Miss Willis was chasing us, I thought she'd come to the trailer, I thought she'd hurt Diana and me.

Diana says Miss Willis's ghost won't hurt me, she'll go after her and Georgie because she hates them. Not me. But, Dee Dee, what could they have done to Miss Willis? She's been dead so long and Diana's only twelve like me. It's all so strange—her parents, the rules, all the things I don't know about Diana's life. My head hurts when I think about it.

But, *no matter what Diana says, I'm still scared and Dad is still at Home Depot, and when he comes home he won't believe a word I say, he'll just be mad because I went into the house when he told me*

not to. Maybe Dad will find another job soon. I hope so. Far away from here. I see now why all those other caretakers left. I don't know how I'll get a single night's sleep as long as we live here.

Let me tell you something, Dee Dee: never say you want to see a ghost.You will definitely be sorry.

Love, Lissa

Chapter 12

Georgie stood in the shed's doorway, a scowl on his face, watching me run through the rain toward him. He'd applied a fresh coat of war paint and added more feathers to his hair. I supposed that meant he was still mad at me. Well, soon he'd be even madder.

"Were you playing with Lissa again?" he asked, daring me to lie.

Instead of answering, I seized his hands. "Oh, Georgie, Georgie—"

"What's wrong?" he asked, suddenly fearful.

"She's loose! Miss Lilian—I saw her. She's just the same, mean, angry. She said—"

Georgie cut in before I could finish. "How did she get out?" His voice shook and he gripped my hands tightly.

"It was Lissa," I said, too ashamed to meet my brother's eyes. "She took a key, she opened the back door, and I went in with her. I knew I shouldn't, but I was scared to let her go by herself. She went all over the house, she even played the piano, and then she wanted to see where Miss Lilian died, so she—"

"You let her open the parlor door?" Georgie stared at me, white-faced with disbelief and fear.

"I tried to drag her away, but she, she—Georgie, I couldn't stop her. She was too strong. She says Miss Willis made her do it, she—"

Georgie flung himself at me, terrified. "I told you something horrible would happen. I told you and told you and told you!"

"It's all my fault," I admitted. "I broke the rules. I'm sorry, Georgie, I'm so sorry."

We clung to each other, shivering and shaking, imagining every sound in the woods was Miss Lilian hunting for us. But all we heard were ordinary noises. Wind in the trees, rain pattering on the shed's roof, a fox barking.

At last, Georgie drew back and looked up at me. His war paint was smeared and his feathers were crooked. "Where is she now, Diana?"

"Miss Lilian? In her bedroom. She didn't need that chair to go upstairs, Georgie. She ran up there all by herself."

“Does that mean she can chase us?” My brother’s eyes roved to the shed’s doorway and the dreary night darkening the field beyond. A damp breeze, carrying the smell of rain and fall’s decay, made him shudder. “Can she come here and, and—”

“Maybe she can’t leave the house,” I whispered. “She must have rules, the same as us.” I squeezed his hand, but I didn’t tell him what I was thinking. I’d broken the rules. Miss Lilian could break them, too.

Silently I crawled under the blankets beside Georgie. This close, my brother smelled like a little animal, a rabbit perhaps, that lived under bushes in fear of hawks.

“Suppose Miss Lilian can go outside like you and me,” Georgie whispered. “What if she comes to the shed while we’re asleep? What if she —”

“I won’t let her hurt you.” I held him so close the feathers in his hair tickled my nose. “I’m your big sister. I’ll take care of you.”

Georgie relaxed, more trusting than I’d expected, considering I hadn’t been the best caretaker lately. Nero crept under the covers and curled up between us, soft and warm. His purr comforted us.

Just when I thought he’d fallen asleep, Georgie rose up slightly and looked into my eyes. “Tell me the story, Diana, all the way to the end.”

“But it always scares you.”

“Not this time, I promise. I need to remember everything so she can’t catch me again.”

While Georgie lay still and quiet beside me, I told him the familiar story of our days at Oak Hill Manor with Mother and Daddy. This time when I came to the part where Miss Lilian turned against Georgie and me, he tensed, but he didn’t make me stop.

“One day,” I whispered, “you cut your leg climbing over a rusty barbed-wire fence. You were bleeding, so I took you to the house to find Mother. She wasn’t there, but Miss Lilian caught us in the kitchen and began to rant and rave in her crazy way. We tried to run outside, but she got between us and the kitchen door, so we ran down the cellar stairs to hide.”

Georgie nudged me. “Why didn’t we run out the front door?”

“We were going to hide in our secret place. Remember?” I stroked his back, soothing him as if he were Nero.

We’d found the little room one afternoon when we were exploring the cellar, way back when we’d first come to Oak Hill Manor. The door was

hidden in a dark corner, behind piles of boxes and old furniture. The room itself had no windows and its walls were thick.

Georgie and I had fixed it up like a clubhouse, with candles and books and a few board games, along with blankets and pillows borrowed from the attic. It was a great place to play without fear of being caught by Miss Willis.

"But Miss Lilian came down the steps behind us," Georgie went on for me. "She was waving a broom and screaming at us. We ran into the room and slammed the door. It was a stupid thing to do."

"We thought we were safe," I said. "But she bolted the door and locked us in." In my head, I heard Miss Willis again, just as I heard her in my worst nightmares. "Stay there! Think about how you've treated me. I'll come back when you're ready to apologize."

"And then she left," Georgie whispered. "And she never came back."

"No, she never came back." My heart beat faster. I wished Georgie would say, "Stop," but he lay beside me, still and tense, a rabbit poised for flight. So I went on to the worst part.

"We cried and shouted for Mother and Daddy, we pounded on the door till our fists ached, but no one heard us. No one came. No one let us out."

Georgie shivered and curled into my arms. I could feel his heart beating as fast as mine.

"We lit candles," I told him. "We ate the crackers we'd left there. But after a while the candles burned down and went out. It was so dark. And cold. We told each other stories, we sang songs . . ." I paused, unable to go on.

"What happened next?" Georgie whispered. "Do you remember?"

"I think we fell asleep. At least that's how it seems. A deep sleep."

"And then we woke up," Georgie said, sounding cheerful again, "and we were outside and the sun was shining."

"Yes." After the darkness of the cellar, the light had hurt our eyes, almost blinded us. We stood in a field overgrown with thistles and poke weed, wild daisies and Queen Anne's lace, swarming with bees and butterflies. At first I'd thought we must be in heaven, but when I looked around, I realized we were still on the farm. The familiar woods lay ahead, their leaves swaying in a summer breeze. The sky was blue, almost cloudless, and a mockingbird sang from a fence post. Grasshoppers jumped around our feet, bees buzzed,

a crow cawed in the woods. A tractor rumbled in the distance. The air smelled of honeysuckle and damp grass.

Behind us was Miss Lilian's house, barely visible through a screen of trees in full leaf.

Everything had been just as it should be, yet I'd felt strange. Not thirsty, not hungry, not weak from our days in the dark cellar. It was as if I'd become very light. A gust of wind might send me spinning higher and higher until the earth was a tiny ball lost among stars.

In the dark shed, I squeezed Georgie's hand, glad to feel its warmth. He propped himself up on his elbows, more himself now that the worst part of the story was over, and peered into my eyes.

"How did we get into that field, Diana? Who opened the door? Who let us out?"

"It was like a dream," I said, at a loss for an explanation. "First we were in the cellar, and then we were in the field with nothing in between. *Bing*—there we were in the sunshine."

"We wanted Mother and Daddy," Georgie said, sad now. "We wanted to go home."

"But we couldn't," I said. "It was against the rules."

"The rules," Georgie muttered. "Always the rules. Where did they come from, Diana? Who gave them to us? Do you remember?"

"It wasn't Mother or Daddy," I said.

"They gave us plenty of rules before the bad thing happened." Georgie yawned. "Like not going into Miss Lilian's house and not touching the piano and not talking with our mouths full and not interrupting. And not, and not . . ."

Georgie's voice trailed off into a mumble and he fell asleep, but I lay beside him, thinking, trying to remember. No one had told us the rules, I was sure of that. No one had written them down and handed them to us. They were just there, in our heads:

Rule One: Do not let anyone see you.
Rule Two: Do not leave Oak Hill Manor.

As long as we obeyed those two rules, we could do anything we liked. Play all day, stay up as late as we wanted, roam the woods and fields, tease and play tricks on the living.

The first night of our new life, Georgie and I had crawled through the open kitchen window of our house and crept to our parents' bedroom. The light was out, but they weren't asleep.

"If Miss Lilian recovers," Mother was saying, "she might be able to tell the police something about Diana and Georgie. Maybe she saw something, heard something, maybe—" She broke off and began to cry.

"What could she tell the police?" Daddy asked. "She's been in the hospital since the children disappeared. Out of her head. Irrational. She couldn't possibly know anything about Georgie and Diana."

Georgie and I hid in the shadows, yearning to tell our parents where we were and what had happened, but in those days, the rules held us fast. We dared not speak to Mother and Daddy.

Long after the police and their dogs had given up the search for us, Mother and Daddy kept looking. We followed them through the woods, around the pond, along the creek, to every place we used to go. I think they expected us to pop out from behind a tree, laughing at the prank we'd played on them. At night, we listened to them weep for us, their lost children. We cried, too.

If only we'd told Mother and Daddy about our secret room. They would have found the door and opened it. They would've let us out and the bad thing wouldn't have happened.

Weeks passed. Summer faded into fall. Miss Lilian came home from the hospital, leaning on a cane, a nurse by her side. In no time, she ran the nurse off. She said she didn't need anyone looking after her. Waste of money, she complained to Mother.

Although the police never questioned Miss Lilian, Mother asked her if she remembered anything about the day Georgie and I disappeared. They were sitting on the terrace, Miss Lilian in a lawn chair and Mother on the lion bench, shelling peas into a bowl. Georgie and I hid in the boxwood, close enough to hear every word.

"I had a stroke," Miss Lilian said, as if that were far more important than Georgie's and my disappearance. "I don't know anything about that girl and boy. Don't ask me again!"

"But you must have heard something," Mother persisted. "A car, perhaps; a stranger's voice, a cry—"

With some effort, Miss Lilian got to her feet. “I know nothing about it! Nothing! I almost died myself that day. Or have you forgotten?”

Leaving Mother on the lion bench, Miss Lilian hobbled into the kitchen, thumping her cane with every step.

Mother sat and wept quietly. Although we were near enough to reach out and touch her, we could do nothing but watch. The rules were strict. And harsh.

After a while Miss Lilian came to the door. She stood there a moment, glowering at Mother. “I can’t afford to keep you and your husband here any longer,” she said. “I want you out of the tenant house in forty-eight hours.”

Mother stared at the old woman in disbelief. “But Miss Lilian, who will take care of you?”

“I don’t need anyone! Especially you, wasting my time and money moping around, crying, thinking of no one but yourself.”

We followed Mother back to the tenant house. Daddy was drinking a cup of coffee in the kitchen.

“Miss Lilian has dismissed us,” she told him. “We have two days to pack up and leave the farm.”

Daddy sighed and set his cup down. “It’s for the best, Alice. We can’t stay here. It’s too hard.”

Mother sat down at the table with him. “But what if they come home and we’re not here?”

Daddy shook his head, his face sorrowful. “Don’t talk that way,” he murmured. “They won’t return. You know it and I know it. They’re gone.”

Mother shook her head. “They’re here on the farm. I feel them near me. So close, so . . .” Her voice broke and she began to cry. “How can I leave them?”

Daddy reached for her hands and held them tightly. “They’ll always be with us. As long as we live, wherever we go.”

And so two days later, Georgie and I hid in the woods and watched Mother and Daddy load their belongings, and ours, into a rental truck. Mother looked tired and sad. Daddy had no smiles, no jokes. He moved slowly, struggling with the weight of mattresses and furniture.

After Daddy loaded the last box, they got into the truck and drove down the lane. Georgie and I followed them through the woods, silently begging them to turn back, to stay near us as we’d stayed near them.

The truck stopped at the gate and Mother stepped out to open it. An autumn breeze stirred her hair and sent a scurry of leaves racing toward her. She looked back at the farm. Softly she called our names, as if she hoped we might finally hear and come running.

Georgie made a move toward her, but I seized his shirt and held him back. “No,” I whispered. “We can’t go to her. You know that.”

He struggled for a moment and then went limp in my arms, his body shaking with sobs, his face against my chest. The rules kept us where we were, as much a part of the farm now as the trees, more firmly rooted to its earth than the deer and foxes.

Silently we watched Daddy drive the truck through the gate. Mother closed it behind him. She lingered, her eyes searching the woods, whispering our names again. Daddy called to her softly, and she climbed into the passenger seat. The door closed almost noiselessly, and Daddy turned off the engine. They sat together for a long time, talking.

“Maybe they’ll change their minds,” Georgie whispered. “Maybe they’ll stay.”

I shook my head. Miss Lilian had fired them. The old stone tenant house was no longer their home.

Finally, Daddy started the truck and turned east on the state road, just two lanes in those days. Georgie and I climbed onto the gate and watched until the truck vanished from sight and the road was empty.

For weeks afterward, Georgie went to the fence and watched for the truck to come back. I didn’t go with him. I knew it would never return.

Finally, Georgie got mad and stopped going to the gate. He said Mother and Daddy had forgotten about us, but he was wrong. No one forgets the people they love. I just wished I knew where they’d gone and what had become of them.

Not long after our parents left, Miss Lilian hired a caretaker, a lazy old man named Jimmy Watts. He spent most of his time drinking whiskey and never fixed anything. He did Miss Lilian’s grocery shopping, and that was all.

He lasted maybe a year. Then he quit, and Miss Lilian hired Earl Powers. He stole money, jewelry, anything he thought might be valuable. Miss Lilian fired him.

After that, Georgie and I couldn’t keep up with the hired men. They came and went, each one as lazy as the one before. None of them bothered with

repairs. Paint peeled, ceilings sagged, the roof leaked.

Years passed. Georgie and I lost count of them. We stayed the ages we'd been when the bad thing happened.

But Miss Lilian got older—and crazier. We helped the process when we could. We flitted through rooms, just out of sight, knocking pictures off walls, throwing things, slamming doors, turning lights on and off. We played the Steinway in the middle of the night, filling the darkness with half-remembered music, alarming the cats and terrifying the hired men. Poltergeists, said one. Ghosts, said another.

"I know who you are!" Miss Lilian would yell and brandish her cane. "Leave me alone! You'll be sorry for this!"

Georgie and I laughed. The old woman couldn't scare us now. We hated her and she hated us.

Then things changed again.

One winter day we ran through the house as usual, chasing each other up and down the steps, laughing and shouting, daring Miss Lilian to come after us with her broom. For once she didn't respond to our taunts. No shouts, no curses, no threats, no tottering footsteps.

Georgie and I dashed from hiding place to hiding place, searching for the old woman. Cats meowed and darted out of our way. A starling trapped in the house flew up the stairs to the second floor. We heard its wings flutter as it brushed past us.

The door to the front parlor was closed. Behind it, I sensed an odd silence. An emptiness beyond emptiness. Georgie looked at me, suddenly fearful. I slowly opened the door and peered into the darkness. Miss Lilian sat in her chair by the window, its velvet drapes drawn against the daylight. Still, she sat so still. Too still.

"Is she asleep?" Georgie whispered.

"No," I said. "She's dead."

Georgie and I backed away. With shaking hands, I shut the door as soundlessly as possible. We ran out of the house, leaving her to be found by the hired man.

As we raced home to the shed, new rules established themselves in our heads, just as the old ones had:

Rule Three: Stay away from the house.

Rule Four: Do not disturb Miss Lilian's slumber.

A week or so later, a hearse came for Miss Lilian. It was a cold, rainy day, as dreary as you can imagine. The lane was muddy, the weeds were dry and brown, the trees bare. A flock of crows watched from the oak tree, perched on the branches like mourners in a church.

As the undertakers prepared to leave, one said to the other, "Well, that's that. Almost a hundred years old and not a soul to mourn her."

His companion nodded. "It's a sad thing to die alone."

With that, they slammed the hearse doors and drove away, taking Miss Lilian's body with them.

But not her spirit. Miss Lilian remained in the parlor, just as Georgie and I remained on the farm.

Now, thanks to me, the old woman was free. And I was afraid as I'd never been before.

The Diary of Lissa Morrison

Dear Dee Dee,

I haven't written to you for a couple of days, but that's because Dad enrolled me in a gymnastics class and I've been busy

I met a girl named Chelsea who told me about something scary that happened at Oak Hill fifty or sixty years ago. Two children disappeared from the farm, a boy and a girl. The police searched everywhere, but they were never found. To this day no one knows what happened to them.

Chelsea says their ghosts are still here, along with Miss Willis's ghost. Sometimes teenagers come to the farm late at night. She knows several, including her own brother, who say they've seen Miss Willis looking out the parlor window. Others claim they've seen the children. Just glimpses of them, wild and ragged, flitting through the woods or standing by the gate late at night. Chelsea thinks they're evil, wicked, dangerous, just like Miss Willis. She says she'd never sleep if she lived on the farm. It's way too scary, everyone thinks so. Even her brother, who's not afraid of anything.

I didn't tell her I'd been inside the house, and I didn't tell her I'd seen Miss Willis. I had a funny feeling Diana didn't want me

blabbing about the ghost. It's kind of a secret, even though I never promised not to tell. Even Dad doesn't know about Miss Willis.

So I just said in this really casual way, "Oh, I've never seen a thing. Your brother must be making that up to scare you"

Of course, down deep inside, I was so scared I couldn't look Chelsea in the eye. Sometimes I try hard to believe Dad's right about me imagining stuff, and that's all Miss Willis was—a figment of my imagination. But if Chelsea's brother and his friends have seen Miss Willis—well, then, she must be real.

And I never knew about the two kids going missing. Maybe that's why the policeman said I shouldn't be wandering in the woods by myself.

As for the ghosts of the kids, I guess Chelsea's brother saw Diana and Georgie running around in the woods the way they always do. I'd better tell them to be more careful or they'll be caught and then there'll be real trouble.

Oh, Dee Dee, I just had the strangest thought—I've got goose bumps all over. What if Diana and Georgie are the ghosts! That couldn't be, could it? I've touched Diana plenty of times, and she's just as solid and real as I am. So's Georgie. Of course, Miss Willis looked pretty real, but I bet if I'd touched her she wouldn't have been solid. Brrr—not that I ever want to see her or touch her!

I haven't seen Diana since the day we went inside the old Willis place. I think she's probably mad at me for dragging her in there. I can't really blame her. It was so stupid. I must have been crazy that day.

I haven't seen Miss Willis, either, thank goodness. I'm hoping she's gone back to being dead, resting in peace or whatever. But sometimes I swear I hear someone playing a piano. It's always the same thing—the Moonlight *Sonata over and over again. I tell myself it can't be Miss Willis, but who else could it be?*

Dad's never heard it, so naturally he thinks it's my imagination or maybe a car's radio as it goes past the farm. Which is ridiculous beyond belief. The road's too far away to hear car radios no matter how loud they are. And why would it always be the same music? I swear, Dee Dee, sometimes I worry I'm losing my mind. I wish I'd never gone inside that house! Nothing's been the same since.

I miss Diana. She might be a little strange, but she's much more interesting than Chelsea—who's not very smart and never reads a book unless her teacher makes her. She can do better cartwheels than I can, though, and she loves to show off her backbends. She wants to be a cheerleader. Not me. I'm going to be an Olympic champion—if I can just get better at backbends and cartwheels.

I really need to talk to Diana. She ought to know people have seen her and Georgie on the farm. I think I'll go to those houses across the highway and look for her. Maybe if I apologize again, we can make up and be friends like before. I could teach her how to do cartwheels and backbends and we could practice together and soon I'd be better than Chelsea.

Love, Lissa

Later the very same day

Guess what, Dee Dee? I went to those houses like I said I would. It was a long walk, but it was a sunny day and not too cold. It's a nice neighborhood. Lots of trees and a pretty little pond with a path that goes around it. I saw ducks and geese, mothers with strollers, people walking their dogs, joggers, some boys riding bikes. I wished Dad and I lived there. I noticed a house for sale, which I plan to tell him about.

But I didn't see Diana or Georgie. After a while I went up to a group of kids sitting on a little dock. They looked friendly, so I asked them if they knew a girl named Diana or her little brother, Georgie.

They said no, they'd never heard of them. I talked to them a long time, but they were absolutely positive Diana and Georgie didn't live in their neighborhood. They said they knew everybody with kids. No one was homeschooled. Everybody went to public school—except one boy named John, who went to St. Mary of the Mills.

What do you make of that, Dee Dee? It's very odd, isn't it? Now I have more questions than ever for Diana, the mystery girl. Or is she just a compulsive liar? I read a book once about a girl like that—she made up stories all the time to impress people. Take Miss Willis, for instance. Diana must be lying about her. Like I said, how can somebody hate you if they died while you were still a baby????? Nothing about that girl makes sense!

Love, Lissa

Chapter 13

A few days later, Georgie and I were perched on a branch in our favorite tree. Without *Lassie* to read, I'd fallen back on *Clematis.* I had a feeling he wasn't listening to anything but the sound of my voice, a comforting background noise as meaningless as a cicada's song.

Annoyed, I gave him a sharp poke in the side. "You haven't heard a word I've said."

Startled from his thoughts, Georgie looked at me. "Do you ever get tired of being twelve, Diana?"

I closed *Clematis,* keeping my place with my finger. Oddly enough, it was a subject I'd given some thought to lately. I supposed it had something to do with meeting Lissa. She'd be thirteen next year, then fourteen, fifteen, and so on. Someday she'd probably get married and have children. But I'd remain twelve. Year after year after year. Just as Georgie would remain eight.

I reached up to stroke Nero, who was now entering his fifteenth year. He was showing a few signs of age, a white hair here and there in his coat, a certain stiffness in his gait. He was one of a long line of cats we'd owned, each growing old and dying, leaving us to find a new one.

"Sometimes," I admitted.

"I was trying to figure it out," Georgie said. "In real life, I'd be almost seventy now. It's hard to be sure when you never have a proper birthday."

"I'd be seventy-two." I laughed. "That's old enough to be Lissa's grandmother. Isn't that funny?"

Georgie didn't laugh. His face solemn, he gazed past me, across the brown fields to the bare trees beyond. "I get so bored doing the same old things over and over and over again. Fish. Catch tadpoles. Climb trees. Swim in the pond. Wade in the creek. We've explored every inch of the farm. There's nothing new to see, nothing new to do."

I tried to think of a good answer, but I couldn't. I was bored, too. "That's one reason I wanted to be friends with Lissa," I told him. "She was new and different."

Georgie frowned at the mention of Lissa, but he didn't say anything about her. Instead, he busied himself peeling loose bark from the tree. "Read some more," he said. "I like to hear your voice."

I hadn't read more than two pages when I heard a twig snap. In the woods, branches swayed, and dry weeds rustled. Georgie grabbed my arm. "She's coming," he whispered. "It's her. Miss Lilian."

We froze, terrified. Should we run? Or stay still and hope she wouldn't see us?

Before we'd decided what to do, Lissa stepped out from the bushes. MacDuff followed her. He fixed his attention on Nero, who lay draped over a branch, tail twitching, eyes on the dog.

"What do you want?" I asked. It was a rude way to greet her, but I was still mad about what she'd done.

Georgie scowled down at her. "Go away!"

Lissa ignored him. She seemed close to tears. "Please don't hate me, Diana." She held up *Lassie Come-Home.* "I brought this back. I thought maybe—"

"It's a dumb story." Georgie folded his arms across his chest and frowned at the sky. "I hate Lassie."

"Come on, Georgie," I said softly. "Let me finish reading it to you. You're bored stiff with *Clematis."*

He didn't say yes and he didn't say no, so I leaned out of the tree and Lissa handed me the book.

"He can have the bear, too." Lissa held up Alfie. I could tell it was hard for her to give him up.

Georgie refused to look at Lissa, but I sensed he wasn't quite as mad as he had been. I reached down for the bear and sat him on a limb near Georgie. He ignored Alfie just as he'd ignored the book, but if I knew Georgie, he was secretly pleased Lissa had returned them.

"Can I climb up there with you?" Lissa asked me.

I shrugged. "If you like. It's not my personal tree or anything. I don't own it."

She scrambled clumsily up the trunk and slung a leg over the branch below mine. After she'd made herself comfortable, she said, "I have to talk to you about something, Diana."

I looked at her and waited. She seemed unsure how to begin. Finally, she said, "I'm taking a gymnastics class at the Y. This girl named Chelsea asked

me where I lived, and when I told her, she said Miss Willis isn't the only ghost here. There are two children. They disappeared a long time ago. No one knows what happened to them. But people say they still haunt the farm."

I gazed at Lissa, envying her pretty face and her shiny hair and her right to live in the world as an ordinary girl. What would she say if I told her the truth about those two children?

"Chelsea says some teenagers came here one night and saw Miss Willis looking out the window of the front parlor," Lissa went on. "They've seen the children, too. Just glimpses of them in the woods or at the gate. They say they're evil spirits."

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling. Teenagers often sneaked onto the farm to drink beer and smoke and kiss each other. Georgie and I loved to sneak up to their cars and make scary sounds. It was hilarious to see them start the engines and roar away, terrified. We'd been doing it for years, so it was no wonder kids talked about us. We were famous, I guessed.

"Have you ever seen the children's ghosts?" Lissa asked.

I caught Georgie's eye. He had his hand over his mouth to stifle his laughter. I knew he loved the part about our being evil spirits.

"No." I kept my voice as low as hers and tried to sound scared. "Are they dangerous?"

"I don't think so," Lissa said slowly. "They're just children."

"Children can be just as wicked as old ladies." Georgie swung by his knees from his branch, his face inches from Lissa's.

She backed away from him. "You'd better be careful. If you fall, you could break your neck."

"And die?"

"Maybe." Lissa glanced at me, as if she were unsure what to make of Georgie's behavior.

Georgie hung there, his face red, and laughed. Suddenly, he let himself fall. He hit the ground and lay sprawled in the weeds like a broken doll.

Lissa screamed and covered her face.

"He's all right," I told her. "Look."

Slowly Lissa uncovered her eyes. Georgie sat ten feet below, laughing up at her. He'd knocked the feathers in his hair crooked, but otherwise he was unscathed.

“That was so stupid,” Lissa shouted, angry now. “You could have killed yourself!”

“Could I?” Still laughing, Georgie stood up. “What if I’m already dead? What if I’m a ghost?”

I wanted to tell him to stop before Lissa guessed the truth about us, but he was in one of his moods. He’d quit when he felt like it. I gave him a warning look, which he, of course, ignored.

“You’re crazy.” Lissa’s voice was still shaky from the sight of Georgie plummeting out of the tree.

“Booooooo!” Georgie made a scary, google-eyed face at her and ran off. Nero and MacDuff watched him go. The cat remained on his branch and the dog remained on the ground, as if neither wanted to yield to the other.

“Your brother hates me.” Lissa looked at me sadly. In a low voice she added, “Maybe you do, too.”

“No.” I flipped through *Clematis,* ruffling the pages like leaves. “But I don’t see how we can be friends.”

“Why not?” Lissa leaned toward me, her face earnest. “I told you I’m sorry. I promise I’ll never go near that house again as long as I live.”

I sighed and continued to flip the pages. “That’s not why we can’t be friends. There’s so much you don’t know about Georgie and me, stuff you’d never understand or even believe.”

Lissa studied me intently, her forehead furrowed beneath a tumble of dark hair. “I know more than you think,” she said slowly. “Yesterday I walked to those houses across the highway. I was looking for you. After a while I met some kids by the pond.”

She paused to look at me closely. Unable to meet her eyes, I pulled a crimson leaf from a branch and twirled its stem in my fingers.

“They told me you don’t live there,” Lissa went on. “They know everybody, but they’ve never heard of you. Or Georgie.”

“So? I told you we’re not allowed to have friends.” I shredded the leaf as I spoke. “I don’t know them, either.”

Lissa inched closer, till her face was inches from mine. “Want to hear what I think?”

I slid out on the limb until it dipped beneath my weight. My mouth felt dry. Had Lissa guessed the truth?

“I think you live right here on the farm,” she said. “Like squatters. Maybe your parents are hippies or survivalists or even fugitives. Maybe

they belong to a weird cult. I don't know and I don't care. You're my friend. That means your secrets are my secrets, too. I'll never tell anyone the truth about you—or your parents. Especially not Dad."

I shifted my position and the limb swayed. If only everything were as simple as Lissa thought.

"The thing is—" I cut myself off and stared past Lissa at the brown field and the house beyond. With most of the trees' leaves gone, I could see the roof and tall chimneys. How could I explain myself to an ordinary girl like Lissa?

"What's the matter, Diana?" She reached out to touch my hand. "I can keep a secret. Do you live in one of the old barns? Or—"

"It doesn't matter where we live," I said slowly. "We won't be here much longer." As soon as I spoke, I knew it was true.

Lissa's eyebrows rose, giving her face a tense, worried look. "Is it because of me? Did your parents find out we're friends?"

I shook my head and felt the heavy weight of my braid shift. "No, it's not because of you. Or your dad. It's time to go, that's all."

"Do you want to leave?" she asked softly.

"Sort of." I fingered my braid. It was beginning to loosen, and I supposed I needed to redo it. "We've been here for ages.

"Lucky you." Lissa sighed. "Dad and I never stay anywhere long."

"Lucky," I echoed softly. If only she knew.

"But where will you go? If it's not too far, maybe we could still see each other." Lissa's face brightened.

I watched a long loose line of geese zigzag across the sky. Their loud cries rang out like the barking of dogs. They were leaving, too. "I think it will be much too far for us to see each other."

Lissa looked at me sadly. "Well, we can always write. And then maybe someday—"

I shook my head. "No. We won't be allowed to tell you where we are."

Lissa looked down at her feet. "More rules, I guess."

"Yes."

Lissa sighed. "Can you at least tell me when you're leaving? Tomorrow? Next week, next month?"

"I'm not sure." I listened to the thoughts in my head and tried to put them into words. "Georgie and I have to do something first."

"What do you mean—do something?"

“You ask too many questions, Lissa.” I didn’t know the answer myself. Not yet, at least. Exasperated, I tossed the books out of the tree. Grabbing a branch, I swung after them and landed on my feet as lightly as Nero.

Lissa looked down at me. “I’m scared to jump from here,” she said. “It’s too high. I could break my leg.”

“Then climb down,” I said impatiently.

I watched her make her way from branch to branch until she was low enough to drop to the ground. “You and Georgie must have rubber bones or something,” she said. “I’d never have the nerve to jump that far.”

“We’ve been jumping out of trees since before you were born.”

Lissa laughed as if I were joking. “Oh,” she said suddenly, “we forgot the bear.” She pointed at Alfie, still perched on his branch.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “Georgie will come back for him and the books.”

Lissa shook her head, still puzzled by my brother’s behavior. “I hope you don’t leave for a long time,” she said. “I’ll really miss you, Diana.”

Maybe I’d miss her. Maybe not. She might fade like a forgotten dream after Georgie and I left. Who knew what we’d remember?

We crossed the field to the trailer. A curl of smoke rose from the chimney and the smell of soup met us at the door. Mr. Morrison looked up from the pot he was stirring and smiled. “Well, well, look what the wind blew in,” he said cheerfully. “You’re just in time for a big hot bowl of chicken soup with noodles, made from scratch, the best you ever tasted.”

“Yum.” Lissa sat at the table and patted the chair beside her. “Sit here, Diana. Dad is the world’s greatest soup chef.”

Before I could protest, Mr. Morrison set down two bowls and fixed a third for himself. The fragrance reminded me of my mother’s soup. She’d made it from Miss Lilian’s leftovers, thick and hearty, a treat for all of us, served with chunks of homemade brown bread and cheese.

I pushed the chair back and stood up. “I’m sorry, I can’t stay. I have to go home. I promised Georgie—”

“But can’t you eat your soup first?” Mr. Morrison asked. “Or bring Georgie back here for lunch? You look like you could use a nice hot meal.”

“No, thank you.” I edged away. “I really can’t stay. I’m sorry.”

“Some other time, then,” Mr. Morrison said, his face as worried as Lissa’s. “The soup’s always on, and you’re more than welcome to join us for a meal. You and your brother need to put some meat on your bones. You’re so thin and pale, both of you.”

“Dad,” Lissa began, obviously embarrassed by her father’s words. He’d meant well, I supposed, so I interrupted her.

“Thanks. That’s very kind of you, Mr. Morrison.” I opened the door and cold air rushed in. “But Georgie and I have all the food we need.”

Safe outside, away from their questions and concerns, I ran with the wind across the field. Being with real live people was just too hard.

I found Georgie in the shed. With Alfie on one side and Nero on the other, he was leafing through *Lassie,* studying the pictures. A shaft of autumn sunlight lit his hair and face. He *was* pale, I realized. And thin. Surely he hadn’t always looked so fragile.

“Read some more, Diana.” Georgie held the book up. “Here’s where you left off.”

Grateful for something to do, I took the book and began chapter eleven, “The Fight for Existence.” The picture showed Lassie, all bones and wet fur, running along with a dead rabbit in her mouth. I knew the dog had to eat, but I wished the artist hadn’t shown her intended meal.

Georgie huddled beside me, listening intently to Lassie’s struggle to survive her long journey from Scotland to England. He held his breath when she fell sick; he was angry when she was falsely blamed for killing sheep and almost shot, scared when she was captured by dogcatchers, and glad when she escaped.

At the end of chapter seventeen, “Lassie Comes over the Border,” Georgie finally let me stop and rest my voice. Lassie was in England at last, safe for a while with a kindly old man and woman who planned to keep her forever.

“They won’t, though,” Georgie said as I closed the book. “Lassie’s not home yet.”

“No, she still has a way to go and a few more adventures before she’s done.”

Georgie lay back on his blankets and gazed out the shed door. It was dark now, and the moon had risen above the trees. It floated there, as big as an orange, dimming the stars but lighting the earth.

“How about us, Diana?” Georgie asked softly. “How far do we have to go before we’re done?”

“I don’t know.” I stared across the silvery field at the black line of trees on the other side. A wind blew up. Branches creaked and swayed. Dried weeds rattled. Nero uncoiled from Georgie’s side and stretched, his back

arched like a Halloween cat's. He went to the door and peered out, ears pricked.

Georgie turned to me, his face fearful. "Nero hears something," he whispered.

"A mouse," I whispered. "That's all."

We both watched the cat. His body was tense; his tail lashed. He began a deep, vibrating growl.

The wind blew harder. All around us, trees and weeds and tangles of underbrush rustled and sighed and moved. A dry grapevine tapped against the wall. The tin roof rattled as something struck it. The shed's old timbers creaked. Dark clouds raced across the sky, veiling the moon and altering the shadows.

In the doorway, Nero hunkered down. His growl changed to a fierce song, its notes rising and falling along with the wind.

"It's not a mouse." Georgie clung to me. "It's Miss Lilian, she's come for us."

I shut my eyes and held him as tightly as I could. "No, it can't be her," I whispered into his hair. "It just can't."

But in my heart I knew he was right. Miss Lilian was out there in the dark, searching for Georgie and me, eager to punish us for the pranks we'd played on her.

Chapter 14

“Diana,” a voice howled from the shadows, “Georgie, it’s no use hiding. I’ll find you wherever you are!”

The moon shot out from behind a cloud, and there she was in the field, brandishing a cane, her white hair blowing in the wind. Georgie and I stumbled to our feet.

I took my brother’s hand. “Quick, out the back way!”

We plunged through a small door in the rear of the shed. With Nero racing ahead, we fled through the woods, tripping over roots and ducking branches. Brambles caught our hair and tore our clothing. But nothing stopped us or even slowed us down. We ran like rabbits fleeing a fox, like deer fleeing a hunter, like mice fleeing an owl, leaping, dodging, practically flying through the underbrush.

“Is she coming?” Georgie cried at one point.

“I don’t know.” The wind made so much noise we couldn’t hear anything but branches thrashing over our heads.

We slid down the bank of the creek and into the ravine where we’d hidden Lissa’s bike. It still lay there, rusty now, half submerged in water. We splashed past it and burrowed into a small cave, our favorite hideout. There in the darkness we crouched with Nero and listened. Miss Lilian’s voice mingled with the wind’s howls. Gradually her calls faded away into the night, and the wind died down.

Georgie cried with relief. I rocked him in my arms as I had for so many years. When his breathing quieted and he stopped sobbing, I lifted his face and looked into his eyes, as brown as a shady pond after rain. “She’s gone,” I said. “She didn’t get us.”

“But she’ll be back,” he said tearfully.

“Yes,” I said slowly, “but we’ll get away from her again. She’ll never catch us.”

“She did once,” Georgie reminded me.

“We’re smarter now.” I crawled to the mouth of the cave and looked out. The night was still except for the distant rush of traffic on the highway.

“She won’t trap us again.”

We slept in the cave that night. In the morning, I sneaked back to the shed and retrieved our belongings—our blankets and books, the flashlight, the penknife, and Alfie. Although I kept every sense alert for her presence, I didn’t encounter a trace of Miss Lilian. Perhaps she couldn’t leave her house in the daylight.

When I returned to the cave, Georgie was sitting at the entrance, braiding vines and leaves into his hair.

“For camouflage,” he said. “You should do it, too.”

I smoothed the long braid hanging over my shoulder. “I don’t care to look like a savage.”

“Suit yourself.” Georgie finished his task and looked at me. “Do you think it’s safe to leave the cave?”

“I didn’t see a sign of her.” I squatted down beside him. “Maybe she only comes out at night.”

Georgie frowned. “I hope you’re right.”

I watched him poke at the dirt with a stick. “Do you ever have funny thoughts?” I asked him.

“Funny?”

“Odd,” I said. “Odd thoughts.”

“What do you mean?”

“Remember how the rules came into our heads and we knew them without anyone telling us what they were?”

Georgie kept his head down and scratched harder with the stick. He was writing his name, one of the few things he recalled from school. “Yes,” he said slowly, “how could I forget?”

“Well, lately I’ve had a new thought. It came the same way. No one told me. All of a sudden it was in my head, like colors and smells and sounds, things that don’t need words.”

“It’s about leaving, isn’t it?” Georgie didn’t look at me. He was adding finishing touches to his name—little curlicues on each letter.

“Do you have the same thought?”

“Yes,” he said. “But we have to do something first.”

I nodded. “Do you know what it is?”

With a gesture of impatience, he rubbed out his name. “I think it’s got something to do with her.”

“Miss Lilian?”

“Yes.” He dropped his voice to a whisper. “And with our bodies. Our real ones.”

I shivered. “Someone should bury them and say the right words so we can rest—”

“I know that.” Georgie scowled, signaling he’d heard all he wanted to hear about our bodies and their burial.

We sat beside each other silently and watched the last leaves spin down from the trees. The creek was filled with those that had already fallen. Shades of red, yellow, and brown, different shapes and sizes. Some were caught in eddies, others lodged among the stones, and a few raced on the current on their way to a larger stream.

Georgie reached out over the water to prod a few leaves loose with his stick. He watched them sail around a bend and turned to me. “Will you read some more of *Lassie?* I want to know how it ends before we leave.”

“We’re coming to a sad part,” I warned him.

“Just read,” Georgie said. “I’m used to sad parts. And so are you.”

I began at chapter eighteen, “The Noblest Gift—Freedom.” Lassie had recovered her strength. Every afternoon just at the time school let out, she began pacing the floor of the little cottage. The old folks tried to make her happy. They treated her well, they fed her and petted her and loved her, but still she wanted to leave, she had to leave.

Georgie pressed against me. “Do they let Lassie go?”

I read on. The old woman opened the door. She and her husband followed Lassie to the road that ran by the cottage. They watched Lassie hesitate. They wanted to call her back, but they knew the dog had to leave. The old woman told Lassie it was all right. If she had to go, why, go she must.

Georgie breathed out a long sigh. We were glad Lassie was on her way but sorry for the old man and woman, left alone in their cottage, too sad to eat their evening meal. The old man offered to bring home another dog, a small one, but no dog could take Lassie’s place. So he suggested a cat instead, “the bonniest little cat ye ever did see.”

Georgie glanced at Nero sitting nearby, licking his paws and scrubbing his face. “I bet it was a big black cat just like Nero.”

At my brother’s urging, I kept reading until I finished. The story ended just as Georgie had hoped. After a few more struggles, Lassie made it home

and met Joe at the school gate as she used to. This time Mr. Carraclough didn't make Joe return the dog to the duke. Instead, he nursed Lassie back to health. In the end, the duke hired Joe's father to run the kennel, he let Joe keep Lassie, and Lassie had puppies.

Georgie grinned. "I wish I could hear it all over again."

Chapter 15

Later that day, I walked to the trailer. It was too cold for Lissa to do her schoolwork at the picnic table, but I hung around for a while, hoping she'd come out. I liked Mr. Morrison, but I wasn't in the mood to pretend to be a normal girl.

After several minutes, I gave up and knocked at the door. Maybe Mr. Morrison was busy in his room, writing his book.

But no, he opened the door and gave me a big smile. "Why, Diana," he said, "come in. You must be freezing in that thin blouse and skirt. And look at your feet. Where are your shoes?"

I hesitated on the threshold, heedless of the wind blowing through the open door. Oh, why did he and Lissa have to ask so many questions?

Before I could change my mind and run back to the woods, Mr. Morrison took my hand and drew me inside. "I promise not to give you any more chicken soup," he said with a laugh. "I didn't realize you were a vegetarian."

A vegetarian—he and Lissa had an amazing ability to come up with explanations for my odd behavior. I supposed the truth was too fantastic for them to guess.

Lissa came out of her bedroom and mumbled a greeting. She was pale. Anxious.

"Miss Grump got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning," Mr. Morrison told me, winking to show he was teasing Lissa. "She hasn't had one nice thing to say."

"I brought your book back." I handed *Lassie* to Lissa. "We finished it this morning. Thanks for letting us borrow it."

Lissa took the book as if it no longer interested her and laid it on a table beside the couch. I couldn't think of what I'd said or done to make her mad, but something was obviously bothering her.

"And *Clematis,* if you still want to read it." I laid the tattered book, its pages warped from the shed's dampness, beside *Lassie.* "It's a good story. With a happy ending."

“Thanks.” Lissa opened it, releasing a slight odor of mildew. “I like the illustrations. They’re so quaint.”

Mr. Morrison leaned over to take a look. “‘By Bertha and Ernest Cobb,’” he read. “Copyright 1917. That is an old book. Where did you find it?”

Inwardly I groaned at yet another question. “In a used-book store,” I lied.

Mr. Morrison nodded and handed Lissa MacDuff’s leash. “Why don’t you two take MacDuff for a walk,” he suggested. “You could both use some fresh air.”

While Lissa snapped the leash to MacDuff’s collar, Mr. Morrison turned to me. “That silly dog kept Lissa and me awake all night, barking his fool head off. I don’t know what’s gotten into him. All I heard was the wind, howling up a storm out there in the woods.”

“It was really blowing hard.” I made an effort to sound like an ordinary person talking about the weather, but I knew what MacDuff had heard. And so did Lissa. Miss Lilian must have wandered all over the farm in the dark and the cold, searching for Georgie and me.

Suddenly anxious to leave, Lissa grabbed her jacket from a hook near the door. “Do you want to borrow a sweatshirt, Diana?”

“For heaven’s sake, yes,” Mr. Morrison answered for me. “She must be freezing.”

To satisfy them, I pulled Lissa’s thick red sweatshirt over my head and followed her and MacDuff outside.

“Don’t let Diana blow away in the wind,” Mr. Morrison called to Lissa.

Lissa gave him one of those looks I’d given my father when he’d said something embarrassing. She didn’t answer him or speak to me. I’d never seen her so quiet.

After we were out of Mr. Morrison’s sight, Lissa turned to me anxiously. “It wasn’t just the wind last night, was it?”

“No,” I said.

Lissa drew in her breath. “She called your name and Georgie’s name. Even with my head under the covers, I could hear her.”

“I told you she’d come after us,” I said.

“But why?” Lissa asked, genuinely puzzled.

Instead of answering, I kept walking, head down, scuffing leaves out of my path. If only I could tell her the truth. She might believe me now. After all, she’d seen Miss Lilian. She’d heard her voice in the wind. She must realize ghosts exist.

“I was with you in the house,” Lissa went on, her voice shaky. “She should be after you and me, not Georgie. He wasn’t even there.”

I looked at her. She was close to tears. “I couldn’t sleep a wink last night,” she said.

“She’s not after you,” I insisted. “She won’t hurt you.”

“I hate this place,” Lissa went on as if she hadn’t heard me. “I told Dad we have to leave, we can’t stay here, but he won’t listen to me. He acts like I’m a baby afraid of the dark.”

Lissa sat down on a boulder at the edge of the field and began to cry. I huddled beside her, sorry she’d been drawn into Georgie’s and my troubles. Indifferent to our worries, MacDuff followed his nose into the weeds, roaming in circles around us, happy to be outside smelling wonderful smells.

Glad for each other’s company, Lissa and I pressed closer together. She shivered despite her warm jacket.

A thick white cloud cover hid the sky, and the air smelled of snow—the first of the year, earlier than usual. My father would have said Mother Goose was about to shake the feathers out of her pillows.

I gazed across the field toward the house. A gust of wind blew through the treetops, making a mournful sound. The air filled with flying leaves. A thought formed in my head, then another and another. They came from nowhere, just the way the rules had. Suddenly, I knew exactly what to say to Lissa. And, more importantly, what not to say.

“Do you remember telling me about those missing children?” I asked her.

She looked at me. She’d stopped crying, but her eyes were red and wet. “The ones Chelsea says haunt the farm?”

I nodded. “What if I told you what happened to them?

“Those children vanished a long, long time ago. How could you know anything about them?”

I leaned closer, forcing Lissa to meet my eyes. In a whisper, I told her the words I heard in my head. It was almost as if someone else was speaking—a ventriloquist, maybe, using my voice. “When we first came here, Georgie and I found an open window in the basement. We used to climb inside and explore the house. It was scary, just like it is now. Creepy. We played the piano, we went through the closets, we stole books and clothes.”

“You said it was against the rules to go in the house,” Lissa reminded me. “Weren’t you scared your parents would find out?”

“In those days, our parents weren’t as strict as they are now. We didn’t have as many rules.”

MacDuff interrupted me with a series of loud barks. He ran to Lissa and sat close to her, whimpering. We both looked across the field, to the trees and the house beyond. We saw nothing, but the dog’s behavior made us uneasy.

Lissa bent over MacDuff and stroked his sides. “What’s the matter, boy?” she whispered. “Do you see something?”

The dog rested his head on Lissa’s knee and gazed at her in a way that made me think of Lassie. He thumped his tail and grinned, as if he’d merely been seeking affection.

I touched Lissa’s arm to regain her attention. “One day Georgie talked me into exploring the cellar. We’d been afraid to go down there because it was so dark, but Georgie borrowed a big flashlight.”

Lissa continued to pet MacDuff, but she was paying close attention to me.

“We found a door in a dark corner of the cellar. It was bolted shut,” I whispered. “And when we opened it—”

Suddenly, Lissa drew back, alarmed by something in my voice. “No, I don’t want to hear any more.”

She covered her ears like Georgie used to, but I pulled her hands away and held them tight. Somebody had to know where Georgie and I were and who had put us there. Somebody had to see to our burial. Otherwise, we’d be prisoners on the farm forever. These were the new rules. I knew them just the way I’d known the old rules.

MacDuff looked at us uneasily, as if he didn’t like the way I was holding Lissa’s hands.

“We opened the door,” I went on relentlessly, spinning the lie as I talked, speeding up the story. Since it was partly Lissa’s fault that the old woman was loose, she might as well be the one to fix things. “Two children were huddled together on the floor. Dead.”

I saw our bodies as they’d been when Georgie and I began our new lives. Like the empty shells of locusts left on tree trunks, they were no longer needed. But they had to be found, they had to be buried.

“Stop it, Diana,” Lissa whispered. “You’re scaring me.”

“It’s true. Miss Lilian locked the children in and left them there to die. No one knew about the room. No one ever found those children.”

“No,” Lissa sobbed. “No, that’s horrible, no one would do something so cruel.”

Once more she tried to free her hands. I held them tighter. MacDuff growled.

“She was crazy,” I cried. “She hated us!”

“Us?” Lissa stared at me. “You said ‘us.’”

“I mean Miss Lilian’s ghost,” I corrected myself. “She hates Georgie and me because we know she killed the children.” My story told, I let go of her hands. MacDuff relaxed and rested his head once more on Lissa’s knee.

“Those poor children,” Lissa whispered. “Those poor, poor children. And their parents—they never knew what happened to them. Oh, Diana.” She was crying again.

“Tell your father, Lissa. Make him believe you. Those children must be buried properly. They can’t rest till they’re in their graves.”

“Is that why their ghosts are still here?”

“Yes.” It was true. I knew it. Once our bodies were found and buried, Georgie and I would be free to go—wherever it was we were going.

Lissa slid off the rock. “Come with me. Help me tell Dad. He’ll never believe me.”

“No, I can’t.” I jumped down beside her, anxious to settle things, to start them moving. “You have to do it yourself.”

Lissa hesitated. “But, Diana, he’ll be mad, he’ll know I went in the house, he’ll—”

I gave her a push toward home. “Go,” I cried. “Go right now. Run! And be sure and tell him who killed them.”

The first flakes of snow had begun to fall, melting where they landed. MacDuff raced in circles, his mouth open in a lopsided grin, snapping at the flakes. Lissa called to him, her voice shrill.

I watched the two of them vanish into the woods. The old rules had changed, fragmented, broken into bits. Telling Lissa had been the right thing to do. I was sure of it.

But I’d changed everything for Georgie and me. The life we’d shared for so many years was about to end.

What would replace it?

THE DIARY OF LISSA MORRISON

Dear Dee Dee,

Last night the wind blew really hard and MacDuff started barking like he heard something outside. Dad said it was teenagers again, sneaking out here to drink beer, but oh, Dee Dee, I heard a voice calling Diana and Georgie. It's Miss Willis—her ghost, that is. Dad went out to chase the teenagers away. I told him not to. It wasn't teenagers, it was—but he left before I could say what it was. I stood in the open doorway, watching him, scared of what might happen. There was no car, no teenagers, just Miss Willis hollering in the dark. Dad came back inside,fussing about pranks, but he never once said he heard anyone calling.

Diana and Georgie are lucky to be leaving this horrible place. If only Dad and I could move away, too.

Today, I asked Diana why Miss Willis was after them. I'd asked her before, but she'd never really answered. This time she told me the truth. Those children who disappeared died in the cellar of the Willis house, and their bodies are still there. Miss Willis locked them in a secret room and left them there to die. Diana and Georgie found the bodies. Diana thinks Miss Willis is after her because she knows who killed the children.

Diana spoke so calmly, but I felt like I might throw up or faint. How could something that horrible happen to two children? I wanted to cover my ears and run away, so I'd never have to see the farm again. Why did I drag poor Diana into that house? Why did she let me? She should've stopped me, she should've told me what was in the cellar. If I'd known, I wouldn't even have sat on the terrace.

Diana said I had to tell Dad about the bodies, I had to make him believe me. The children must be buried properly. Otherwise, they'll never rest in peace.

So I ran home, just when the snow was starting, and I told Dad.

At first he didn't believe me. He said Diana must be pulling my leg. But I begged him to go to the cellar and see for himself. Finally, he said, Okay, okay, but nothing will be there. This is ridiculous, and so on and so on and so on while I was crying and shaking and terrified.

Finally, he took his keys and a flashlight and left with MacDuff.

I was all alone. I wished Diana had come home with me like I'd asked her to. The wind was blowing and the snow was falling and now it was sticking, not melting like before. It was almost dark, and I was scared Miss Willis would hurt Dad. What if she locked him in the room with the children's bodies? I hadn't thought of that when he left.

So I put on my parka and my boots and gloves and hat and went out to look for him. The wind blew the snow in my face, cold enough to take my breath away. "Dad!" I called. "MacDuff!"

No one answered. I walked on, still yelling for Dad and MacDuff.

Oh, Dee Dee, when I was close enough to see the house, Miss Willis stepped out of the trees and stopped in front of me, blocking the way. She wore the same raggedy gray silk dress, and her hair blew, as white as snow itself.

"Diana!" she screamed at me. "Diana, stop running from me!"

"I'm not Diana," I cried, but she reached for me as if she hadn't heard me. Her hands closed tight on my wrists, colder than the snow, stronger than steel.

"Diana, listen to me! Don't run away!"

This close, her face was the color of bone. Her eyes were sunken and shadowy, but they glittered with rage. She shook me fiercely "Where's Georgie?"

"Let me go," I sobbed, "let me go. I'm not Diana!"

She tightened her grip and leaned closer to me. Her breath smelled like her house, old and dank. The wind tugged at her dress. "I know you," she whispered. "You're the girl who let me out, the one who changed everything. Should I thank you? Or curse you?" She paused a moment and grinned. "Or should I lock you in the cellar?"

Somehow, I broke free and ran toward the trailer. Behind me, I heard a horrible witchy laugh. "Stupid girl," she cried. "Did I scare you?

I didn't know if she was chasing me or not. I was scared to look back. Screaming and crying for my father, I flung open the front door and kicked it shut behind me. Exhausted, I collapsed and lay on the floor, too scared to move.

After a while, I heard someone thumping on the door. I covered my ears and stayed where I was. It was her, I knew it was. Shed come to lock me in the cellar.

"Lissa, let me in!" Dad yelled.

I got to my feet and staggered to the door. I was scared to open it. What if Miss Willis was still there? Would she hurt Dad? My hands shook so much I could hardly turn the knob.

He stepped inside, bringing cold air with him. I threw my arms around him and kept on crying. He patted my back and smoothed my hair, but I could feel him trembling.

"Oh, Lissa, Lissa," he whispered. "I found the room just where Diana said it would be. It was terrible . . . terrible."

His voice broke and he sank down on the couch. He looked awful, Dee Dee, like he'd just seen the most horrible thing you can imagine. I think he was as scared as I was. And close to tears, too, Dee Dee, which frightened me even more. I hadn't seen my father cry since Mom died.

"How could anyone do something like that?" he asked in a shaky voice. "Those poor children, those poor little children, left there like that, locked in, abandoned."

He hugged me so tight I could hardly breathe. When he let me go, neither of us said anything. We just sat there. I guess we were in a state of shock. The wind was blowing so hard the trailer shook.

I was sure I heard Miss Willis out there. And so did MacDuff. He kept pacing around, whimpering and whining the way he does when he's nervous about something. Dad told him to lie down, but he wouldn't.

After a while, Dad said I looked exhausted. He was right. I was so tired I ached all over like I had the flu. He made me go to bed and fixed me tea and sat down beside me while I drank it. He'd made it with lemon and honey and it tasted so good.

Then he called the police and told them what he'd found in the cellar. I listened to his voice, still shaking as he talked. He said it was no wonder the children were never found. Someone had piled boxes and old furniture in front of the door to the room.

There was a pause and then Dad said, "Yes, I agree. It must have been Miss Willis. Who else could have done it?"

After he hung up, he came back to my room and sat with me for a while. It was dark by then, and the snow blew past my window in a pale blur. My room looked safe and cozy, but I didn't feel all that secure. Not with Miss Willis out there looking for Diana and Georgie. I hoped they felt safer than I did. But I doubt it.

"The police will be here early tomorrow," Dad said. "They'll see to it that the children are properly buried."

That made us both feel a little better, I think.

I tried to tell Dad what I knew about Miss Willis, but he said, "Hush, hush, let's not think about that old woman anymore. She'll give us nightmares for sure." He hugged me and kissed my forehead and tucked me under the covers, all tight and snug and warm.

MacDuff came to my room and jumped up on my bed. Dad usually chases him off, but tonight he said he could stay. MacDuff is the best old dog in the world, but even with him right here beside me I'm still scared.

I wish the wind would stop. I wish it was morning. I wish we lived in one of those nice little houses across the highway. I wish Diana lived there, too, and we went to the same school and took gymnastics together.

Most of all, I wish those children hadn't died in that cellar. They must have been so scared, Dee Dee.

Love, Lissa

Chapter 16

When Georgie and I woke in the morning, the falling snow hung like gauze between the mouth of the cave and the ravine, blurring rocks and trees, earth and sky. The only sounds were the gurgle of the creek and the wind, now a soft murmur.

Georgie peered out at the snow, at least a foot deep already, and laughed. "No school today!"

It was a joke of long standing now, left from the time when we'd actually gone to school and celebrated days off.

Nero sat at the cave's entrance, his displeasure evident. He looked at me as if to say, "What sort of bad joke is this?"

"The little mousies are safe from you today," I told him.

Nero twitched his tail and stalked to the back of the cave. There he snuggled in the blankets and watched the snow through slitted eyes.

"Do you think the police will come in this weather?" Georgie asked me.

The night before, I'd told him what I'd asked Lissa to do. I'd thought he'd be angry, but he'd listened calmly. "It's the first step." He'd tapped the side of his head. "I feel it here. You know, like the rules."

Now the two of us watched the snow fall: barefoot, barelegged Georgie, half naked, with feathers in his hair; me with my long braid, and Lissa's sweatshirt over Miss Lilian's flowered skirt. Neither of us knew what to expect next or how to prepare. Without saying a word, we left the cave and walked through the snow toward the house. We had to see the police come. We had to watch them go, too. We had to be sure.

We met Lissa and MacDuff halfway down the driveway. She ran to us, her face pale despite the wind and snow. "I've been looking for you," she cried. "I was scared she might have gotten you last night."

Lissa didn't need to say the name. We knew who she meant. "We heard her," I said. "She came close a few times."

"Old witch," Georgie muttered. "She won't get us again."

Lissa breathed a sigh of relief. "She caught me last night. She thought I was you, Diana."

For once, Georgie looked at Lissa without sneering. “How did you get away?” he asked.

Lissa shook her head. “I guess she wanted Diana, not me.”

“I bet you were scared,” Georgie said, some of his old scorn returning.

“I was terrified.” Lissa began crying. “Dad went to the house to look for the children’s bodies, and I got scared and followed him. That’s when she grabbed me. She was so horrible. . . .”

I hugged her as if she were a little child, years younger than I was. “I told you she wouldn’t hurt you,” I whispered.

“Did your father find the children’s bodies?” Georgie asked.

Lissa nodded. “Just where Diana said they’d be. He called the police. They’re supposed to come today.” She looked around doubtfully. “But with all this snow . . .”

I drew in my breath and took Georgie’s hand. There was no turning back now. Whatever I’d begun the day I met Lissa had to run its course.

“I see them.” Georgie pointed down the driveway.

The three of us ducked behind a tree. Led by a police car, a hearse made its way slowly toward us.

“It’s the same one that took Miss Lilian away,” Georgie said.

“How do you know that?” Lissa asked.

“All hearses look the same.” I spoke quickly to keep Georgie from saying anything else. “That’s what he means.”

Georgie frowned, but he didn’t argue as I’d feared he might. Instead, he gave Lissa a sassy look, which she ignored. The two of them would never be friends.

The police car passed us, its lights flashing. An officer in the passenger seat was drinking coffee from a paper cup. The other was intent on driving. Behind them the hearse slipped and slid, but the driver managed to keep it on the driveway.

“Where do you suppose they’ll take us?” Georgie asked me.

“The police aren’t going to take you anywhere,” Lissa said. “They’ve come for the children’s bodies, not for you.”

Georgie drew closer to me. “You think you’re so smart,” he told Lissa scornfully. “But you don’t know anything.”

“Shh,” I warned him as softly as I could.

The wind whipped Lissa’s hair around her face, and she hunched her shoulders against the cold. From the looks of her, she was scared and cold

—and very unhappy.

The silence between us grew. We were alone in the trees. The police car and the hearse had vanished around a bend in the drive. Every now and then, we could hear tires spin in the snow.

"Let's not fight any more, Georgie," Lissa said. "I'm sorry for all the dumb things I've said and done. Dad says I'm too prickly. I guess he's right."

I looked at my brother. "You're sort of prickly yourself, you know."

"So what if I am?" He scooped up a handful of snow and hurled it at a tree—*splat.* "I could've thrown it at you," he told Lissa with a grin, "but I didn't."

Lissa smiled. "It's good you didn't," she said. "My dad taught me how to make a really hard snowball."

Georgie touched my hand. "Come on."

With MacDuff bounding ahead, we plodded on through the snow until the house was in sight. Georgie pulled me behind a huge oak. Lissa hid with us, pressed beside me.

The hearse and the police car, its lights still flashing, were parked by the front steps. The tall double doors stood open. While Mr. Morrison talked with one of the police, the men from the hearse maneuvered a gurney up the rotting steps. Excited by the commotion, MacDuff ran to Mr. Morrison. One of the policemen patted him.

"Are you going to watch them bring the bodies out?" Lissa whispered. I had a feeling she wanted to leave.

Georgie nodded, but I touched his arm. "Let's go."

"Why?"

"Because it's morbid to stay here and watch," I told him.

"Don't you want to be sure they find us?"

I glanced at Lissa, but she was edging away toward the warmth and safety of the trailer. She hadn't heard Georgie.

"Please, Georgie," I whispered. "Watch what you say. Do you want Lissa to know everything?"

He shrugged. "It doesn't matter anymore."

"I'm going to the trailer with her," I said. "Please come with us."

Georgie didn't answer. Nor did he move. His attention was fixed on the house's open doors and the darkness beyond.

I left him there and ran after Lissa. "Wait!"

Behind me, the policeman's voice droned on. He was saying something about ghosts, old mysteries, Miss Lilian's role in the children's disappearance. With every step I took, my back prickled. I was tempted to look over my shoulder, but whatever came out of that cellar was best not seen.

From the high gray dome of the sky, a hawk dove toward the field not far from the drive. In a second he was flying upward again, a mouse in his talons.

Lissa glanced at the hawk and shuddered. "I hate this farm."

"Hawks have to live," I said.

"It's not just the hawk and the mouse," Lissa said. "That's just plain old nature. I mean ghosts and dead children and crazy people—things that give me nightmares. I want to leave, like you."

I followed her into the trailer. "Do you want hot chocolate?" she asked.

"No, thanks."

"How about peanut butter cookies?" She held out a plate. "Dad and I made them this morning. Don't they smell delicious?"

I shook my head. "Thanks, but I'm not hungry."

Lissa sat down at the counter. I took a seat beside her. "I guess your parents don't allow you to eat sweets," she said.

"That's right." I toyed with a pencil lying on the counter, spinning it idly this way and that. It was hard to think of anything but the cellar and what the men from the morgue were doing down there.

Lissa fixed herself a cup of cocoa and ate a few cookies. I breathed in the aroma. It was almost as satisfying as actually eating and drinking.

"Let's play checkers," Lissa said. "The board's all set up."

I followed her to the sofa. The checkerboard lay on the coffee table, ready to go. "Red or black?" Lissa asked.

"Black." I picked up a checker and rolled it in my fingers. Maybe a game would take my mind away from the cellar.

Lissa won easily. Not because she was a good player. I made sloppy moves, I overlooked traps, I let myself be cornered and captured.

"What's wrong, Diana?" Lissa asked.

"Nothing." I gathered up my captured men and began setting up the board for another game.

"You're miles away," she insisted. "I can tell by the way you're playing."

I sat back and studied the checkers lined up on the board, so orderly, so perfect. Had the men put the bodies in the hearse? Was Georgie still watching? I shouldn't have left him there all by himself in the snow. I should have made him come with Lissa and me.

"It's the children in the cellar, isn't it?" she asked. "You're thinking about them."

Lissa jiggled the board accidentally, and I nudged a checker back into position.

Undiscouraged by my silence, Lissa moved closer to me. "How did you keep it a secret so long?"

I sighed. "There was no one to tell."

"Your parents—you could have told them."

"I wish to heaven I could have." I slid away from Lissa and gazed out the window across the room. Bare trees blew in the wind. Georgie was out there, small and thin, his hair full of leaves and feathers, watching, waiting.

"I can't believe your parents are as strict as you say." Lissa slumped on the couch and propped her feet on the coffee table, further disturbing the order of the checkerboard.

Silently I leaned forward and moved the pieces back to the center of their squares.

"Oh, Diana." Lissa sighed. "Sometimes I feel like I don't know you at all."

"You don't," I said.

She stared at me, speechless for once.

Mr. Morrison chose that moment to open the door. MacDuff followed him inside, wagging his tail, shaking snow off his fur.

Lissa jumped to her feet, scattering the checkers in her haste. This time I ignored them. What did it matter, anyway?

"Did they take the children away?" she asked.

Mr. Morrison blew his nose. "They've made arrangements to bury them at Mount Holly."

"Do their parents know?" Lissa asked.

Mr. Morrison shook his head. "It's such a sad situation. The children's parents are both dead. No uncles, no aunts, no living relatives."

I got to my feet, my chest tight, my legs weak. "They're dead?" I asked. "Mother and Daddy both?"

Lissa looked at me oddly, but I was too upset to wonder why. All I could think of was what her father had just said, his voice so calm, his manner so ordinary.

"That's what the police told me," he said. "They're buried at Mount Holly. At least the children will be with them now."

I covered my face with my hands. All this time, I'd pictured Mother and Daddy alive somewhere, waiting for news of us. I hadn't considered the weeks, the months, the years as they'd rolled past. As Georgie had said, it was hard to keep track of time without birthdays and holidays.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. "Now, now, Diana," Mr. Morrison said softly. "I don't blame you for crying, but it happened long ago. Try to think of it as a story you read in a book."

"You don't understand," I whispered. At that moment I wanted him to put his arms around me as if I were his child, his daughter. I wanted him to comfort me, to stroke my hair. I wanted to tell him everything about Georgie and me and Miss Lilian and the terrible thing that happened to us. I wanted him to know who those bodies belonged to. Instead, I shrugged his hand off and edged away from him, closer to the door, closer to escape. "It's not a story," I said. "It's true."

Lissa eyed me solemnly, full of curiosity, but for once she had no questions.

"Of course it's true," Mr. Morrison said, beginning to sound uncomfortable. "I was only trying—"

"I know," I said. "It's okay." I'd reached the door. My hand was on the knob. I turned it.

"Don't leave, Diana," Mr. Morrison said. "I'll fix you tea, hot chocolate —"

"Dad." Lissa took her father by the arm. "I think Diana wants to go home."

With MacDuff between them, Mr. Morrison and Lissa stood in the doorway and watched me leave. "Find Georgie," Mr. Morrison called. "Bring him back here. We can watch a video. Eat supper. I make a great vegetarian chili."

"No," I said. "I'm sorry. I can't."

I turned my back on the open doorway and the warmth inside and ran across the field toward the woods.

Chapter 17

I found Georgie in the cave with Nero, huddled under a pile of blankets, his dirty face tear-streaked.

"Georgie, Georgie." I threw myself down beside him and held him tight. "What did you see? What did you hear?"

He cuddled close to me, as much in need of comfort as I was. "They came outside with the gurney," he whispered. "They'd zipped us—our bodies—into black bags. Oh, Diana, the bags were so small. I guess all they found were—"

"Hush." I covered his mouth with my hand. "I told you not to watch."

Georgie pushed my hand away. "You have to hear this part, Diana. It's about Miss Lilian."

I lay back, propped on my elbows, and let him go on.

"The police were talking," Georgie told me. "One said it might've been an accident, but the other said the door was bolted from the outside. That meant someone had locked us in, he said—and who else could it have been but that crazy old woman?"

"It's a shame nobody figured that out sooner," I said. "Miss Lilian got away with killing us. She never went to jail, she was never punished."

"It's not fair." Georgie scowled. "It's not fair, Diana!"

I pulled the covers up under my chin. The fading light of day shone through the cave's opening, barely illuminating the darkness around us. "Did the police say anything else?" I asked.

Georgie shifted his position to see me better. "Mother and Daddy are dead," he said in a low voice. "But I'd guessed that already. Hadn't you?"

"I always hoped they'd come back for us someday," I told him. "I guess that's silly, but, well, I wanted it to be true, so I—" I pressed my lips together and tried not to cry.

"They're going to bury us with Mother and Daddy," Georgie said, as if to console me. "We'll all be together, Diana."

I wasn't consoled. I wanted to be with Mother and Daddy again, but not in a graveyard. I wanted them to be here on the farm, the way we were

before the bad thing happened.

Outside, twilight darkened into night. The wind blew harder, soughing in the treetops. Far away, from the direction of the house, came the faint sound of a piano. Miss Lilian's favorite piece, the *Moonlight* Sonata, floated through the darkness, eerie, distorted, out of tune. I pictured her at the piano, back in the days when its mahogany gleamed and every note was true. Her hands struck the keys, her head moved to the music's rhythm, her thin body swayed. I stood in the doorway, watching, hearing her mistakes, yearning to push her aside and play the piece properly. She looked up and saw me. Her face twisted in anger, and she slammed the piano lid shut. "Get out!" she yelled. "Get out!"

Pushing the memory away, I burrowed deeper under the covers, hoping to block the sound of the piano. Beside me, Georgie slept quietly, Lissa's bear clasped to his chest. Nero came closer, turned around once or twice, and curled between us, purring as if he hoped to comfort us. But there was no comfort without Mother and Daddy.

The next thing I knew, Georgie was shaking my shoulder. "Diana "he whispered. "Something's outside the cave."

I rose to my knees, listening for sounds in the darkness outside. I heard nothing, but Nero's back rose and his tail puffed to twice its normal size. The cave filled with his eerie growling song.

"It's her." Georgie clutched my arm, his nails biting into my skin. "It's Miss Lilian."

We crept to the cave's entrance and peered into the night. The wind shook shadows across the snow, confusing my eyes.

Then I heard what Georgie had heard, a voice calling, rising and falling with the wind. She was in the woods, not far away, coming toward us.

"Run," Georgie whimpered. "Don't let her get us!"

I would have taken his hand, but he was clutching Alfie. The two of us darted out of the cave and slid down the snowy bank into the creek. She must not trap us again.

Through the woods, across fields and streams, uphill and down, we ran and she followed, calling us again and again. Our names echoed from bare trees, bounced back from the snow, became unrecognizable. Deer fled from the sounds of the chase, bounding through the snow in fright. A fox barked from a boulder and vanished into a thicket, fearful for his own safety.

Georgie and I came out of the woods behind the house. It sat on the hill above us, a dark shape crouched against the moonlit sky, its crooked chimneys rising like broken fingers from the roof. We ran across the snowy lawn spiked with dead weeds. I looked back. She was behind us, running as only the dead can run, tirelessly, her white hair wild and loose in the wind, her gray dress fluttering.

"Diana, Georgie," she cried, as if she knew no words other than our names. "Diana, Georgie!"

"Not there!" I grabbed Georgie's arm to steer him away from the house.

He looked at me, glassy-eyed with fear, as if he didn't know where he was or what he was doing.

Still holding his arm, I skirted the house and ran down the drive. The tracks of the police car and the hearse cast shadows in the snow. Like a ghost himself, the albino deer stood at the edge of the trees. He watched us for a moment and then vanished into the shadows.

Behind us Miss Lilian called, "Diana, Georgie! Diana, Georgie!"

On we ran. On she came.

At the end of the driveway we realized we could go no farther. We'd come to the fence between us and the rest of the world. I yanked Georgie to the right, planning to run along the fence, but he slipped in the snow and fell by the gate, pulling me down with him.

We scrambled to our feet, but we were too late. Miss Lilian had us trapped between the fence and a thicket of bushes and vines heaped with snow.

She was close enough for us to see her clearly. She was old, she was ill, she was thinner than ever. She stretched her bony hands toward us and chanted our names, "Diana and Georgie, I have you now. Don't try to escape. I've chased you more than enough!"

I thrust Georgie behind me. She mustn't get him, she mustn't hurt him. I'd protect him this time. "What do you want?" I cried. "Haven't you done enough to us already?"

She lunged at me, seized my arm, and pulled me close. Her cold fingers pressed my skin, chilling me to the bone. "You've given me no rest, no peace. Not while I was alive. Not after my death. And now, now—"

"Leave my sister alone." Still holding Alfie, Georgie tried to pull me away from Miss Lilian. "You hurt us, you made the bad thing happen!"

“You!” She turned to Georgie, her face filled with fury. “You were always the bad one. Making faces at me behind your mother’s back, teasing and tormenting me, stealing my things. Why, you have my bear right now. Give him to me!”

Georgie drew back, clutching Alfie. “This is my bear, not yours! Lissa gave him to me.”

“Let us go,” I begged her. “We can’t harm you now.”

“Oh, no.” Miss Lilian held us both, her grip too strong to break. “I can’t let you go. Not yet. We have old accounts to settle, the three of us.”

Georgie and I clung to each other in dread. What accounts? Tweaking Miss Lilian’s skirts, knocking pictures off the walls, breaking knickknacks, slamming doors, hiding her jewelry, taking her money—small things compared to what she’d done to us.

“Just look at you,” she said suddenly. “Hiding on my farm like fugitives, one of you dressed in my clothes and the other wearing almost nothing but feathers in his hair. Filthy. Rude. Stealing and lying. You’re a disgrace to your parents. To my parents. To society itself.”

“It’s your fault we’re here!” Georgie cried.

Miss Lilian stepped back as if he’d struck her. “My fault? How dare you say such a thing? Nothing is my fault. Nothing!”

“Liar,” Georgie retorted. “You know what you did.”

“What happened was your own fault,” Miss Lilian went on. “You deserved to be punished. Someone had to teach you a lesson. Your parents never raised a hand to you. They let you run wild. So the duty fell to me.”

Too angry now to be afraid, I thrust my face into hers, daring her to harm me. “You chased us into the cellar and locked us in that room, and then you left us there—”

“To teach you a lesson,” she repeated. “That’s all I meant to do.”

“A lesson?” I stared at her in disbelief. “You killed us!”

She released us then and began fidgeting with the string of pearls around her neck. “No,” she whispered. “It was an accident. An unfortunate accident. Surely you realize I didn’t mean to hurt you. I didn’t mean to!”

Georgie brushed me aside and walked right up to Miss Lilian, storming with anger. “You’re a murderer!” he shouted. “You should have gone to jail. They should have executed you!”

“I had a stroke,” Miss Lilian shouted back. “A stroke! You upset me, my blood pressure shot up, I collapsed at the top of the cellar steps. Your

mother found me on the kitchen floor, unconscious. Your father called an ambulance. They put a tube down my throat, they put something over my mouth. How could I tell anyone where you were? I was more dead than alive."

Miss Lilian smoothed her dress, touched her hair, wrung her hands nervously. "I was in the hospital a long time. Weeks, months, I can't be sure. I couldn't speak. Couldn't move. It's a wonder I didn't die." She toyed with the pearls, sliding them between her fingers one by one as if she were counting them.

She peered at Georgie and me, her eyes sharp. "When I finally recovered, what happened in the cellar seemed like a dream, a nightmare—not something I'd really done."

I stood in the snow, almost mesmerized by the soft *click, click* of the pearls, and tried to understand what I'd just heard. Miss Lilian hadn't meant to kill us. It was an accident. She'd had a stroke and gone to the hospital. While she was there, unable to speak, we'd died, Georgie and me.

"Why didn't you tell someone when you could talk?" I asked her.

Miss Lilian's hands strayed from her pearls to her hair and then to her dress, smoothing, twitching, tweaking, never still. "What good would it have done? You were dead by then."

"Our parents—" I began, but Miss Lilian interrupted, her voice shrill.

"I would have been arrested. Me—Lilian Eleanora Willis, the daughter of Judge John Willis, the granddaughter of an attorney, the descendant of one of the oldest families in Maryland. Can you imagine the disgrace?"

She touched her hair again, smoothed her dress, opened and shut her mouth, grimacing with the effort of finding the right words. "I lived to be almost one hundred years old," she went on slowly, close to tears now. "Every year was more miserable than the one before. All I wanted was to die and be done with it. But ten years after my death, I'm still here on this farm, as unhappy as ever. No rest, no peace. I've been punished long enough. I want to move on. It's time. Past time."

The old woman took a deep breath and looked toward the empty road beyond the gate, her face filled with longing. The moonlight fell on her gaunt face, darkening her eyes.

"Now you know the truth," she said. "Don't stand there like ninnies. Speak up. Say what must be said. Or, or—" Her voice dwindled and she began to fidget with her pearls again.

Words crowded into my head. I knew what must be said, I knew what must be done. But it wasn't easy.

While Georgie stood there, hugging his bear, I forced myself to take Miss Lilian's hand and look into her eyes. Her hand twitched as if she intended to draw it away, so I held it tighter, pressing the bones in her fingers.

"We've been angry with you for a long time," I told her. "Afraid of you, too. But now I think we must forgive you. And you must forgive us."

Georgie snorted in surprise. "Why does she need to forgive us? What did we ever do to her that she didn't deserve? Everything's been her fault. Even before the bad thing, she was mean."

Without releasing Miss Lilian, I grabbed one of Georgie's hands. "Stop blaming her. She's old. Let it go. All of it. Everything."

Clutching Alfie with his free hand, he tried to pull away, his face sulky. I squeezed his hand. "If we don't forgive each other," I said, "we'll all be here forever. It's the last rule, Georgie. Can't you feel it?"

Georgie didn't look at me or Miss Lilian, but his hand went limp in mine. I watched the anger leave his face. Cautiously I placed his hand in Miss Lilian's. He didn't yank it away. Like Miss Lilian, he stood quietly.

"I'm sorry I locked you in the storeroom," Miss Lilian said to Georgie and me. It cost her a lot of effort to add, "And before—I shouldn't have treated you the way I did. Even though you—"

"I'm sorry I teased you and took your things," I said quickly, before she ruined her apology.

For a moment Georgie didn't speak. I squeezed his hand again, worried he was about to doom us to an eternity at Oak Hill Manor.

"I'm sorry, too," he finally managed. But he didn't look at Miss Lilian. He held Alfie tightly, as if he expected the old woman to snatch the bear away.

The farm was still. No owl hooted, no fox barked, no wind stirred the trees. Beyond the fence, the highway was deserted. Something was about to happen. We could sense it in the silence.

Slowly the moonlight brightened. It cast ink-black shadows across the brilliant snow. Half blinded, we drew closer together, unsure, a little afraid.

"Diana," Georgie whispered. "Look."

He pointed at the road. Two people walked slowly toward us, their faces indistinct, their forms shadowy despite the blinding light. Georgie pressed himself against me, and Miss Lilian held my hand tighter.

“Who are they?” Georgie asked. “What do they want?”

“It’s Mother,” I whispered, “and Daddy. They’ve come for us at last.”

Georgie and I broke away from Miss Lilian and shoved the gate open. We ran out into the road, free at last from the farm and its rules.

Mother and Daddy hurried toward us, calling our names, eager to hold us once more. Georgie sprinted ahead. As he flung himself at Mother, I heard Miss Lilian cry, “Don’t leave me! Take me with you!”

I came to a sudden stop halfway between the gate and my parents and looked back. The old woman stood at the edge of the light, her arms stretched out to Mother and Daddy. “Please,” she cried, “please, forgive me.”

Mother turned to Daddy, her eyes full of questions. When he hesitated, I ran to him. “Don’t leave her here,” I begged. “She didn’t mean to, it was an accident. She’s sorry.”

Mother looked at Daddy again. This time he nodded. Mother held out her hand. “Come with us, Miss Lilian.”

I walked to the old woman. As I reached for her hand, I noticed Alfie sitting on the fence. I glanced at Georgie but said nothing. It was clear he no longer needed the bear.

Miss Lilian hobbled through the gate toward me. She looked back once, as though bidding Oak Hill Manor farewell forever.

Together, the five of us walked into the brilliance. It was as if we were entering the moon itself.

The Diary of Lissa Morrison

Dear Dee Dee,

I will never see Diana or Georgie or Miss Willis again. They are gone forever.

But before I tell you how I know that, I guess I should start with what Dad told me after Diana left.

Dad fixed hot cocoa for me and coffee for himseff. Then he put the plate of peanut butter cookies on the table and sat down across from me. “The police told me the names of the children in the cellar,” he said. “Diana and Georgie Eldridge. Odd coincidence, those first names, don’t you think?”

It made me shiver all over because I had the same thought I'd had before about Diana and Georgie. Only now I knew it was true. Diana and Georgie were the children in the cellar. The bodies in the storeroom were their bodies. Suddenly, everything about Diana made sense, and I could hardly believe I hadn't figured it out earlier.

Which means ghosts are not at all what I imagined them to be. Not transparent, not spooky, not phantoms of the night, but real and solid, with shadows and everything—only they never get cold and they can't eat or drink or hurt themselves. You could sit next to a ghost at a bus stop and never know it. You could be friends with one and not even suspect. That's what I think, at least.

After Dad told me the children's names, I started crying. He tried to comfort me. "You're too sensitive to deal with all that's happened here," he said. "Maybe we should move, maybe I should find a different job. Go back to teaching, maybe. Would you like that? You could live in a neighborhood with other kids and have a more normal life."

I stared at him, amazed. "Do you really mean that?" I asked.

He said yes, he meant it. He'd been thinking about it for several days, and it seemed to him I needed more friends. He doesn't want me to spend so much time alone. It's not good for me, he says. Especially now, in light of all that's happened.

So he's going to start looking for a job and another place to live. I told him about the house for sale across the highway. He said he'd look into it, but it's probably too expensive.

In the meantime, I can start school in Adelphia.

Which makes me very happy, even though the farm doesn't seem so scary now that Miss Willis is gone.

BUT, DEE DEE, THAT'S NOT THE END OF MY STORY.

That night, Miss Willis began calling Diana and Georgie again. Even though I was afraid, I looked out the window. In the moonlight, I saw Diana and Georgie running across the field toward the driveway. Miss Willis was close behind.

I pulled on my boots and parka and sneaked outside. Stumbling through the snow, I ran after them. I didn't know what I was going

to do, but I wished I'd brought MacDuff.

Miss Willis caught Diana and Georgie by the gate. I didn't dare go too close, so I couldn't hear anyone but Miss Willis, who ranted and raved loudly enough to wake Dad. She blamed everything on Diana and Georgie. It was their fault they died in the cellar. Not hers. How could she believe such a crazy thing? She locked them in; she left them there.

She had excuses for everything, but what she did was wrong—she should have told Diana and Georgie's parents. She made them suffer even more because they never knew what happened to their children.

Then an amazing thing happened, Dee Dee. Diana reached out and took Miss Willis's hand. She made Georgie take the other. He didn't want to. For once I was on his side. I would never have forgiven that horrible old woman. They all spoke in low voices. Oh, I wish I'd been brave enough to creep closer so I could have heard what they were saying.

Suddenly, the moon began to shine brighter and brighter. It almost blinded me. I've never seen a moon like that. It was absolutely supernatural. And terrifying. But, beautiful, too. I crouched in the shadows, and waited to see what would happen next.

The next thing I knew, Diana and Georgie ran out the gate and into the road. I heard Georgie call his mother and father. Miss Willis stood by herself, watching them go. Then she stretched out her arms and cried, "Don't leave me!"

Diana turned and looked back at Miss Willis. The moon shone right through her. She held her hand out to the old woman—the very person who had killed her and her brother.

I ran toward Diana. I had to say goodbye, I had to tell her I'd never forget her, but before I reached the gate, she was gone. And so was Miss Willis.

The moon dimmed and shone with an ordinary light, and I could see the highway stretching away, empty. Behind me, leading up to the gate, were three sets of footprints, four counting mine. On the other side, the police car and hearse had left their tracks, but not one footprint marked the snow on the road.

And then I saw something on the gate—my bear, just sitting there as if he was waiting for me. Georgie must have left him for me. I picked up Tedward and rubbed my face against his soft fur. He smelled like Georgie, not quite clean but not really dirty.

I don't know how long I stayed at the gate, shivering in the wind, staring at the empty road and the moon high up in the sky as bright as a new dime. Did I think they'd return if I waited long enough?

No, they were gone for good. And they'd let Miss Willis go with them. Even after the terrible thing she'd done.

Finally, I got so cold I thought I'd freeze to death standing there by the gate. Feeling sad and lonely, I turned my back to the highway and started home. The wind made a racket in the treetops, but I didn't hear Miss Willis or her piano. No one watched me from the woods. The night was as ordinary as a winter night can be, and I was alone.

Well, not quite alone. Halfway home, who did I see but Nero, making his way toward me, lifting each paw daintily and giving it a little shake. He meowed as if to say he'd been waiting for me a long time and he was cold and hungry.

I picked him up. His purr rumbled against my chest and I buried my face in his soft, sweet fur.

"Well," I said, "I guess you're my cat now. So you might as well come home with me."

When I tell Dad Diana is gone (not where or how, just that she moved like an ordinary girl), I know he'll let me keep Nero. I just hope MacDuff won't mind. Surely he's used to the cat by now.

Oh, Dee Dee, I wish I'd had a chance to say goodbye to Diana. Every time I see the full moon, I'll think of her and wonder where she is. Happy, I hope. With her family in some beautiful place beyond the moon.

Maybe my mother is there, too. I wonder if she'll come for me some moonlit night a long, long time from now.

Love, Lissa

Frequently Asked Questions

Why do you like writing spooky stories?
I enjoy adding a touch of fantasy or unreality to a story. A ghost often makes things happen. A ghost may also give a character insight or empathy, a deeper understanding of his own nature or of the world around him. It's fun to twitch reality, to imagine something beyond our five senses.

Do you believe in ghosts?
Since we began to gather around fires to protect us from the dark and its dangers, we have believed in ghosts, yet no one can prove they exist. On the other hand, no one can prove they don't exist. Thus, ghosts occupy a gray area or the twilight zone, so to speak. I've read many "true" ghost stories and have heard dozens of accounts from friends and acquaintances, some of which have been very convincing. I suppose you could say I lean toward believing but am not absolutely positive. It's important to keep an open mind. Doubt is good.

Have you ever seen a ghost?
Maybe. Once I was the only guest in an inn in Kansas. Formerly a family home, the house was built in the 1880s. On my last night there, I woke to see a man in my room. His back was turned, but I could see he wore old-fashioned clothing. I tried to speak but couldn't get a word out. Suddenly he turned and saw me. He looked at me fearfully and hurried out of the room, as if I wasn't supposed to see him.

I might have dreamed the whole encounter, but the woman who owned the inn told me she was convinced the place was haunted. Later, visitors saw a face at the attic window and refused to believe no one was up there.

How did you decide to become a writer?
I entered writing through the back door, the picture door instead of the word door. When I was young, I wanted to be an artist. I drew all the time, often making up stories to illustrate. In the beginning I told myself the story in

my head as I drew, but as I grew older I realized my stories were too long and complicated to tell in pictures. I needed words, too.

From the age of thirteen, I wanted to be an artist or a writer and sometimes thought of combining the two by becoming a writer and illustrator of children's books. However, life doesn't always go as you expect. It seems I write better than I draw, so that's what I do—when I'm not drawing.

Where do you get your ideas?

It sounds like an easy question, but it isn't. Ideas come from everywhere—memories of my childhood, stories people tell me, things I see. All it takes is a good "What if" question to begin a story. Sometimes the hardest part is choosing one idea at a time. I have a head full of them—some work, some don't.

What were your favorite books when you were young?

When I was in fifth grade, my mother gave me *Lassie Come Home*, by Eric Knight. I loved that collie so much I read the book five times, still a record for me. It's a wonderful story and well worth reading.

Other favorites were the Moffat family books by Eleanor Estes, the Melendy family books by Elizabeth Enright, *Anne of Green Gables* by Lucy Montgomery, *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, Sherlock Holmes stories by Arthur Conan Doyle, *Kidnapped* and *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson, *King of the Wind* by Marguerite Henry, and on and on and on. I loved dog stories, horse stories, adventure stories, mysteries, and funny stories about mischievous children. In fact, I read just about anything I could get my hands on.

Of all the books you've written, which is your favorite?

Stepping on the Cracks will always be my favorite because it comes straight from my own life (with a few changes of course).

Do you have any hobbies?

I spend many hours drawing and painting, but I don't consider it a hobby. To me, a hobby is something you do to pass the time, something that doesn't mean much to you. I'm fairly passionate about art and take it way too seriously to think of it as a hobby. I used to sew and make puppets and

dolls but I never thought of that as a hobby. I read intensely, write intensely, paint intensely. I guess I just don't have time for hobbies.

Do you have any advice for young people who want to become writers? The first thing is read read read and read some more. Most of what I know about writing comes from the books I've read.

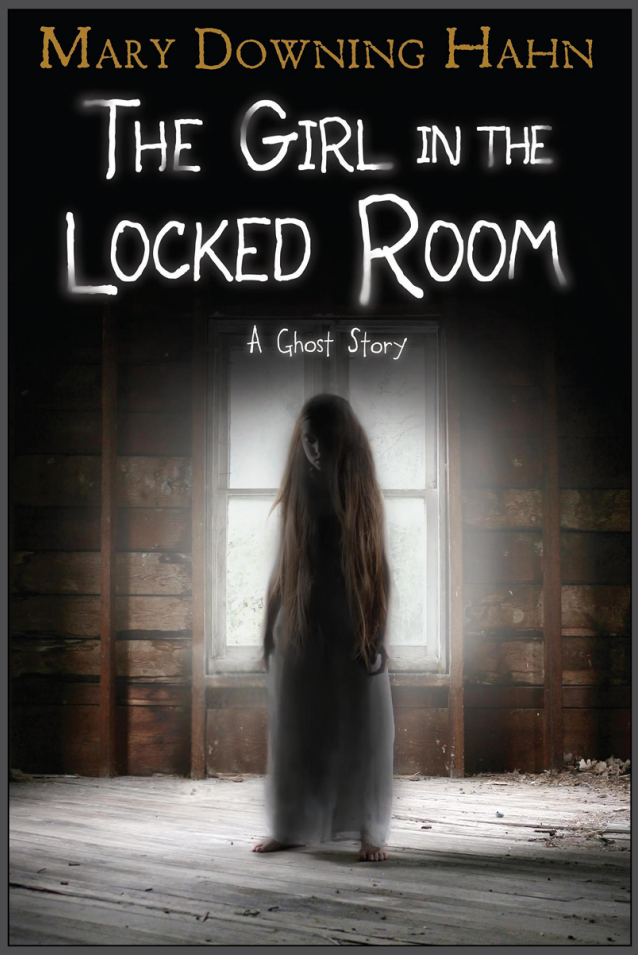
Think of it this way—while you read, you absorb plots, characterization, sentence structure, grammar. Your vocabulary grows. You learn to empathize with characters in books and subsequently with the people around you. And all of this learning is absolutely painless. You don't even know you're learning anything. You think you're just reading a good story, but your mind is soaking up the mechanics of writing.

Of course, you should also write as much and as often as you can. Write the kind of stories you love to read—without copying anyone else's ideas, of course! Keep a journal but make it interesting. If nothing happens all day, skip that entry. Wait for the events you really want to remember. Keep your writing vivid by using as many of your senses as you can. How did it look, how did it sound, how did it smell, how did it taste, how did it feel?

Most of all, have fun—don't worry if you can't finish something. Go on to your next idea, but save the unfinished story in case you think of what happens next.

Oh, you should also keep your eyes and ears open for ideas. Be observant. Ask yourself "what if" questions. Even though reading is important, you also need to get outside and do things.

Ghost story master Mary Downing Hahn unrolls the suspenseful, spine-chilling yarn of a girl imprisoned for more than a century, the terrifying events that put her there, and a friendship that crosses the boundary between past and present.



Keep reading for a sample of

THE GIRL IN THE LOCKED ROOM

by Mary Downing Hahn

1

The Girl

The girl is alone in the locked room. At first, she writes the day of the week, the month, and the year on a wall. She means to keep a record of her time in the room, but after a while she begins skipping a day or several days. Soon, days, months, and years become a meaningless jumble. She forgets her birthday. And then her name.

But what does it matter? No one comes to visit, no one asks her name, no one asks how old she is.

At first, the room seems large, but soon it shrinks—or seems to. It becomes a prison. The key disappeared long ago. No matter—she's afraid to leave. They're waiting for her to open the door. She feels their presence, faint in the daytime but solid and loud at night. Their boots storm up the steps. They hammer on the door. They yell for her to come out.

But how can she? The door is locked from the outside. Even if she wanted to, she could not obey their commands. She huddles in the shadows, her eyes closed, her fingers in her ears, and waits for them to leave.

The trouble is, they always come back. Not every night, but often enough that she always waits to hear their horses gallop toward the house, to hear their boots on the stairs, to hear their fists on her door.

She used to know who they were and why they came, but now she knows only that they are bad men who will hurt her if they find her. They say they won't, but she doesn't believe them.

So she huddles in the wardrobe, under a pile of old dresses, and doesn't move until she hears their horses gallop away.

Every morning, the girl looks at a date written on the wall—June 1, 1889. She doesn't remember why she wrote the date or what happened that day.

Indeed, she isn't even sure she wrote it. Maybe someone else, some other girl, was here once. Maybe that girl wrote the date.

Someone, perhaps that other girl, certainly not herself, drew pictures on the wall. They tell a story, a terrible story. The story frightens her. It makes her cry sometimes.

In a strange way, she knows the story is true, the story is about her. Not the girl she is now, but perhaps the girl she used to be before they locked her in this room.

But who was that girl? A girl should remember her own name, if nothing else. Why is her brain so fuzzy?

Near the end of the picture story, men on horses gallop to the house. They must be the ones who come to her door at night. Did they draw the pictures to scare her?

There are other paintings in the room, real paintings, beautiful paintings. A few hang on the walls, but most lean against the wall. The same people are in most of them. A pretty woman, a little girl with yellow hair, a bearded man—a family. She pretends she's the little girl. The woman is her mother. The man is her father.

She must have had a mother and a father once. Doesn't everyone?

She talks to them, and she talks for them. They have long, made-up conversations that she never remembers for more than a day.

If only she could bring them to life. They look so real. Why can't they step out of the paintings and keep her company?

Years pass. The girl stops looking at the drawings on the wall. She wearies of the people in the paintings. What good are they to her? They're just faces on canvas. Flat. They cannot see her or hear her. They cannot talk to her. They cannot help her. They are useless.

She turns their faces to the wall. She forgets they are there.

Seasons follow each other round and round like clockwork figures. Leaves fall, snow falls, rain falls. Flowers bloom, flowers wilt, flowers die. Snow falls again. And again. And again.

Birds nest under the eaves and sometimes find their way into the room. Trees grow taller. Their branches spread. Young trees surround the house. They push against its walls. In the summer, their leaves press against the only window and block the sunlight. The room is a dim green cave.

Brambles and vines climb the stone walls. Their roots burrow into cracks and crevices, and they cling tight. Tendrils manage to find their way inside. Every year, their leaves fall on the floor of her room.

Gradually the house blends into the woods, and people forget it's there.

The girl stays in the locked room and waits. She no longer knows who or what she is waiting for. Something, someone . . .

She is lonelier than you can imagine.

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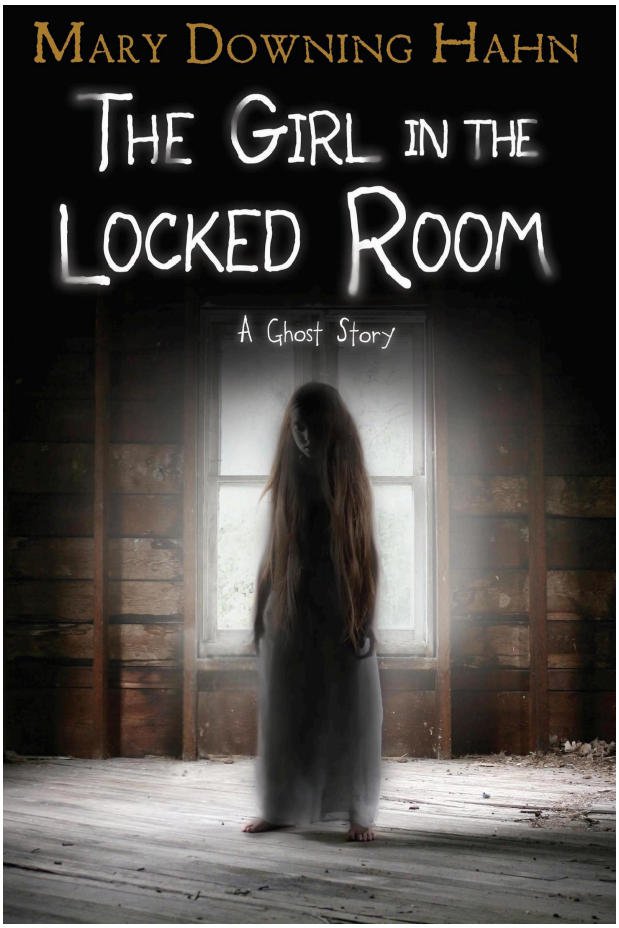

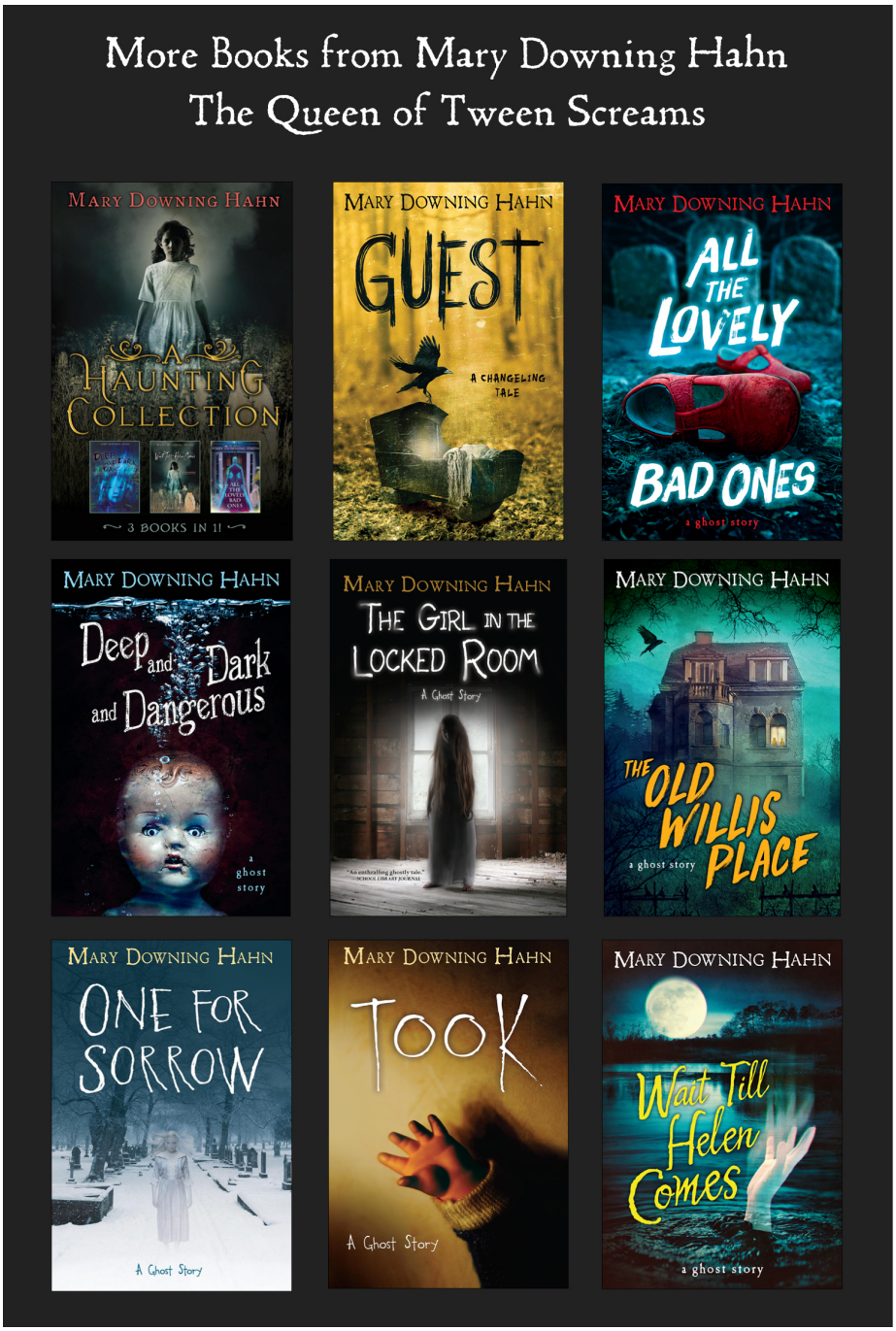

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About the Author

PHOTO BY JAMES FERRY

MARY DOWNING HAHN is the author of some three dozen acclaimed novels, including such beloved ghost stories as *The Girl in the Locked Room, Took, The Ghost of Crutchfield Hall,* and *Wait Till Helen Comes*. A former librarian, Mary has received more than fifty child-voted state awards for her work. She lives in Columbia, Maryland, with a cat named Nixi, and pursues her interest in travel and photography when she isn't writing.

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